

# **LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT ON THE JOURNEY TO IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

**By**

**Slindile Sbakhile Penelope Mavundla**

**BSocSci Psychology (UP); HONS BA Psychology (UNISA); PGCE  
(UNISA)**

**Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of**

**Master of Education in Education Psychology  
in the**

**Faculty of Education**

**at**

**Stellenbosch University**

**Supervisor: Lynette Collair**

## **DECLARATION**

By submitting this thesis, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third-party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification

Slindile SP Mavundla

Date: March 2020

## **ABSTRACT**

Research has shown that humanity undergoes different stages of development, and identity development in adolescence is one of these stages. In order to attain identity, this requires adolescents to interact successfully with different environments. This study aimed to understand the journey of identity development among adolescents who are underachieving at school, which is an environment that they interact with frequently at this stage. Studies on adults with learning difficulties have found that the experiences of learners who have learning difficulties are a topic worthy of being explored, as adults reported how their childhood experiences had influenced their adult life. This study focused on learners who had not been assessed and diagnosed as having any learning disorders. However, these learners found academic studies a challenge, because they experienced grade retention or social promotion at school.

The study used an interpretivist paradigm, as the aim was to understand and describe the learners' experiences. Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews, observations and a drawing activity. To obtain richer data, the interviews were conducted in IsiZulu, because it was the participants' home language. Thematic analysis was applied to the translations. All these strategies helped to gain in-depth insights to the participants' journey towards identity development.

Findings showed that by not achieving academically, the participants had not successfully resolved the stage of "industry versus inferiority". This sparked a sense of inadequacy and inferiority in the participants and it influenced how the participants handled the next stage of development, namely, "identity versus role confusion". The participants internalised external expectations of who they ought to be and how they should carry themselves. As a result, the participants sought future careers that would align with these social expectations, instead of using their skills and talents as a guide to their choice of a career. The participants also identified more with the communities that they lived in, as opposed to their school community, because the internalised expectations were what their families and communities encouraged.

**KEYWORDS:** Grade Retention; Social Promotion; Identity Development

## OPSOMMING

Navorsing het getoon dat die mensdom verskillende stadiums van ontwikkeling ondergaan, en dat identiteitsontwikkeling in adolessensie een van hierdie fases is. Om identiteit te verkry, vereis dit dat adolessente suksesvol met verskillende omgewings omgaan. Hierdie studie het ten doel gehad om die reis van identiteitsontwikkeling onder tieners wat op skool onderpresteer, te verstaan, wat 'n omgewing is waarmee hulle op hierdie stadium gereeld in wisselwerking is. Uit studies oor volwassenes met leerprobleme is bevind dat die ervarings van leerders met leerprobleme 'n onderwerp is wat die moeite werd is om te ondersoek, aangesien volwassenes berig het hoe hul kinderlike ervarings hul volwasse lewe beïnvloed het. Hierdie studie het gefokus op leerders wat nie geassesseer en gediagnoseer is as enige leerstoornisse nie. Hierdie leerders het akademiese studies egter 'n uitdaging gevind omdat hulle graadbehoud of sosiale bevordering op skool ervaar het.

Die studie het 'n interpretivistiese paradigma gebruik, aangesien die doel was om die ervarings van die leerders te verstaan en te beskryf. Data is versamel deur middel van semigestruktureerde onderhoude, waarnemings en 'n tekenaktiwiteit. Om ryker data te bekom, is die onderhoude in IsiZulu gevoer, omdat dit die deelnemers se huistaal was. Tematiese analise is toegepas op die vertalings. Al hierdie strategieë het gehelp om 'n diepgaande insig te kry oor die deelnemers se reis na identiteitsontwikkeling.

Bevindinge het getoon dat die deelnemers nie die akademiese prestasie behaal het deur die fase van 'industrie versus minderwaardigheid' suksesvol af te handel nie. Dit het 'n gevoel van ontoereikendheid en minderwaardigheid by die deelnemers laat ontstaan en dit het beïnvloed hoe die deelnemers die volgende fase van ontwikkeling hanteer het, naamlik 'identiteit teenoor rolverwarring'. Die deelnemers het eksterne verwagtinge geïnternaliseer oor wie hulle behoort te wees en hoe hulle hulself moet dra. Die resultaat was dat die deelnemers toekomstige loopbane gesoek het wat ooreenstem met hierdie sosiale verwagtinge, in plaas daarvan om hul vaardighede en talente te gebruik as 'n riglyn vir hul keuse van 'n loopbaan. Die deelnemers het ook meer geïdentifiseer met die gemeenskappe waarin hulle gewoon het, in teenstelling met hul skoolgemeenskap, omdat die geïnternaliseerde verwagtinge was wat hul gesinne en gemeenskappe aangemoedig het.

**SLEUTELWOORDE:** Graadbehoud; Sosiale bevordering; Identiteitsontwikkeling

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you Lord for your grace throughout this journey. Romans 8:26.

To my sons, Bandile and Asakhe, thank you for letting me chase my dreams at a time when you needed me around. Your voicenotes kept me going. Skhanyisele you couldn't have picked a better time to come into my life. You all played an important role in mommy becoming the woman of wonder she is today.

To my parents, Thandiwe and Bhekisisa. You two are my strength. A solid foundation in continuously pressing forward no matter how tough the road gets. Thank you for taking over my parenting role whilst I was away. I am because you are.

To my family, kwaNgongoma nakwaMavundla, thank you for all your prayers and well wishes.

To my supervisor, Lynette Collair, thank you for your guidance and believing in me. More so for pushing me till the end.

To my editor Dr Reville Nussey, it was wonderful working with you. I appreciate you jumping at such short notice and giving it your all.

To friends, old and new, thank you for reading portions of my thesis; for phone calls, texts, lunch, coffee and ice cream dates when I needed to breathe.

The journey wouldn't have been a success without you all. No act of kindness went unnoticed. Thank you from the depths of my heart.

## Table of contents

Declaration .....	i
Abstract .....	ii
Opsomming .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Table of contents.....	v
List of tables .....	ix
List of figures .....	x
List of appendices .....	xi
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	
<b>CONTEXT AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 INTRODUCTION .....	2
1.2 MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY .....	2
1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT .....	2
1.3.1 <i>Purpose of the study</i> .....	4
1.3.2 <i>Research goals</i> .....	4
1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	4
1.5 THE RESEARCH PROCESS .....	4
1.5.1 Research paradigm .....	4
1.5.2 Research design .....	5
1.5.3 Research methodology .....	6
1.5.4 Research methods .....	6
1.5.4.1 <i>Selection of participants</i> .....	7
1.5.4.2 <i>Data collection methods</i> .....	8
1.5.4.3 <i>Data analysis</i> .....	9
1.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	9
1.7 KEY TERMS .....	10
1.7.1 Learning barriers .....	10
1.7.2 Identity development.....	10
1.7.3 Underachievement .....	11

1.7.4 Grade retention .....	11
1.7.5 Social Promotion .....	11
1.7.6 Phase .....	11
1.8 CONCLUSION .....	12

## **CHAPTER 2**

<b>LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 INTRODUCTION .....	13
2.2 GRADE RETENTION .....	16
2.3 SOCIAL PROMOTION .....	18
2.4 IDENTITY .....	19
2.4.1 Defining identity .....	19
2.4.2 Theoretical framework / Erik Erikson's Developmental Stages .....	21
2.5 SCHOOL AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT .....	23
2.6 CONCLUSION .....	25

## **CHAPTER 3**

<b>RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>27</b>
3.1 INTRODUCTION .....	27
3.2 THE RESEARCH QUESTION .....	27
3.3 RESEARCH PARADIGM .....	27
3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN .....	30
3.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....	32
3.5.1 Context for the study .....	32
3.5.2 Selection of research participants .....	33
3.5.3 Methods of data collection .....	34
3.5.3.1 <i>Literature review</i> .....	34
3.5.3.2 <i>Interviewing</i> .....	35
3.5.3.3 <i>Observation</i> .....	36
3.5.3.4 <i>Drawing activity</i> .....	37

3.5.3.5 Recording of data .....	38
3.5.4 Data analysis and interpretation .....	38
3.5.5 Data verification strategies .....	40
3.5.5.1 Credibility .....	41
3.5.5.2 Reflexivity/confirmability .....	41
3.5.5.3 Dependability .....	41
3.6 LIMITATIONS OF STUDY .....	41
3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....	42
3.7.1 Ethical clearance .....	42
3.7.2 Informed Consent .....	42
3.7.3 Confidentiality .....	42
3.7.4 Respect for community .....	43
3.7.5 Respect for persons .....	43
3.7.6 Anonymity .....	43
3.7.7 Privacy .....	43
3.7.8 Cost/Benefits ratio .....	44
3.7.9 Access and acceptance .....	44
3.8 CONCLUSION .....	44
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	
<b>RESEARCH FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>45</b>
4.1 INTRODUCTION .....	45
4.2 ANALYSIS PROCESS .....	45
4.3 PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS .....	46
4.3.1 Sense of self .....	46
4.3.1.1 Feelings of inferiority .....	47
4.3.1.2 Preference for accepting external expectations of who individuals should be and how to carry themselves .....	48
4.3.2 Career aspirations .....	49
4.3.2.1 School performance opens up possibility of going into careers that hold no meaning for participants .....	49
4.3.2.2 Career as a “redeeming feature” following school performance .....	50



4.3.3 Community involvement .....	52
4.3.4 School .....	52
4.3.4.1 <i>School is of high importance in the lives of participants</i> .....	52
4.3.4.2 <i>Completing school leads to a career</i> .....	52
4.4 INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS .....	54
4.5 RECOMMENDATIONS .....	57
4.6 REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .....	58
4.7 CONCLUDING REFLECTION .....	59
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>61</b>
Addendum A: Letter granting ethical clearance for the study .....	69
Addendum B: Letter granting permission for study DoE KwaZulu Natal.....	70
Addendum C: Letter of permission from school principal.....	71
Addendum D: Letter of agreement to provide psychology services.....	72
Addendum E: Parent consent form.....	73
Addendum F: Assent form.....	77
Addendum G: Interview guide.....	80
Addendum H: Observation guide.....	84
Addendum I: Drawing activity guide.....	85
Addendum J: Transcription with coding- Interview.....	86
Addendum K: Transcription with coding- Observation.....	86
Addendum L: Transcription with coding- Drawing activity.....	86
Addendum M: Coding and themes.....	86

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1: Scale of achievement for the National Curriculum Statement .....	11
Table 2.1: Promotional requirements grades 7-9 extracted from National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12, 2017.....	14
Table 2.2: Promotional requirements grades 10-12 extracted from National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12, 2017.....	15
Table 2.3: Erikson's stages of psychosocial development.....	23
Table 3.1: Characteristics of interpretivism.....	30
Table 3.2: Table of data sources.....	38
Table 4.1: Background of research participants.....	46
Table 4.2: Categories and themes identified in data.....	46

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1: The research design of the current study.....	32
Figure 4.1: Data analysis process.....	45
Figure 4.2: Summary of participants' responses .....	55

## LIST OF APPENDICES

Addendum A: Letter granting ethical clearance for the study .....	69
Addendum B: Letter granting permission for study DoE KwaZulu Natal.....	70
Addendum C: Letter of permission from school principal.....	71
Addendum D: Letter of agreement to provide psychology services.....	72
Addendum E: Parent consent form.....	73
Addendum F: Assent form.....	77
Addendum G: Interview guide.....	80
Addendum H: Observation guide.....	84
Addendum I: Drawing activity guide.....	85
Addendum J: Transcription with coding- Interview.....	86
Addendum K: Transcription with coding- Observation.....	86
Addendum L: Transcription with coding- Drawing activity.....	86
Addendum M: Coding and themes.....	86

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **CONTEXT AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

In an attempt to understand how a human being develops psychologically during the course of their life, it is useful to examine the different stages of development. During this process of growth “[e]ach item comes to its ascendance, meets its crisis and finds its lasting solution” (Erikson, 1965, p. 230). Many studies have looked at the development of identity in adolescence (Burrow & Patrick, 2011; McLean & Mansfield, 2012; Sturdevent & Spear, 2002; Thom & Coetzee, 2004), as this is the stage when the individual “questions ideologies, attitudes and values acquired from role models during childhood through identification” (Thom & Coetzee, 2004, p. 184). For the individual, the ultimate goal is to succeed in attaining an identity.

In order to reach this goal of successfully attaining an identity, adolescents have to: “find themselves and their possible niche in society before assuming adult responsibilities” (Thom & Coetzee, 2004, p. 188); successfully interact with their environments “particularly home, school and community” (Sturdevent & Spear, 2002, p. 30); cultivate a sense of purpose (Burrow & Hill, 2011, p. 1196), as “purpose is a central, self-organising aim that organises and stimulates goals, manages behaviour and provides a sense of meaning” (McKnight & Kashdan, as cited in Burrow & Hill, 2011, p. 1197). Erik Erikson (1968, p. 87) states: “Youth construct a sense of self (identity) through active exploration that leads them to commit to particular identities over time”. Many of these studies look at youth population in general, but do not examine the different subgroups within this population.

This study seeks to understand the journey of identity development that takes place during adolescence, but with a special focus on underachieving learners. Studies that focus on adults with learning difficulties when they were learners at school, report that negative childhood experiences influenced their adult lives, for example, if they were embarrassed by a teacher in front of a class, then this led to them struggling with social relationships, because the public humiliation resulted in feelings of being different

(Carawan & Rennick, 2011, p. 76; Gibson & Kendall, 2010, p. 189; Nalavany, 2011). Thus to focus on learners who experience learning difficulties at school is a worthy research topic. Although many of the learners in this study were not formally assessed and diagnosed as having learning difficulties, they underachieved according to the promotion requirements stipulated by the National Department of Education (DoE) in South Africa: either they were promoted, allowed to go the next grade though the learner had not fulfilled the promotion requirements of their previous grade, or they were retained in their current grade for another year due to not fulfilling the promotion requirements of the grade. Based on the effects experienced by the adults in the studies mentioned previously, it is relevant to document current adolescent learners' experiences in this study.

## **1.2 MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY**

My career as an educator began in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal where I encountered many adolescent learners who struggled with the content of the subjects they studied in high school. As their educators, we established opportunities for the learners to be involved in activities outside of the academic curriculum.

Overall, the initiatives we put in place were successful, as our learners won many prizes and awards for their participation. However, I identified another problem, because the same group of learners were participating in these activities, namely, those learners whose achievement at school was labelled average and above average. The learners considered to be underachievers refused to participate in these activities, even when the teachers called on them to do so. One of the learners stated: "That kind of stuff is not for people like me, but for the learners who like doing things and being seen", which suggested that these learners had simply accepted and settled for a life of underachievement at school. At their age, while forming identities, the teachers expected that opportunities for self-discovery would be met with much excitement. Instead, it seemed that those who underachieved at school chose the role of watching their peers becoming new selves, and excluded themselves from this exciting process.

### 1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Erik Erikson (1968, p. 67) identified eight developmental stages characterised by developmental tasks and crises, where each has a situation in which the individual is required to orientate him or herself according to two opposing poles. This situation is brought about by the interaction between an individual and society. One crisis dominates each stage of development, though all opposing poles are present throughout life. In reference to adolescence, Erik Erikson (1965, p. 234) identified this stage as the “identity versus role confusion” stage, where the adolescent begins to form an identity. Identity plays a role in one’s wellbeing, because it protects against negative psychosocial functioning (Beyer & Luyckx, 2016; Markovitch, Luyckx, Klimstra, Abramson & Knafo-Noam, 2017; Meca, Schwartz, Ritchie, Benitez, Beyers, Picariello, Zamboanga, Hardy, Luyckx, Kim, Whitbourne, Crocettie & Brown, 2015; Negru-Subtirica, Pop, Luyckx, Dezutter & Steger, 2016; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca & Ritchie, 2013). Marcia (1967, p.172) developed the identity status paradigm as a method to subject Erikson’s theory to empirical study. In this work by Marcia (1967) identity is classified in terms of absence or presence of a crisis and the how the individual has explored and committed to characteristics of identity. Research on school and identity has focused on the following: a theory of recognition to understand the school environment as well as children and adolescents’ journey towards identity development (Gibson & Kendall, 2010; Jeznik, 2015); how categories such as race, gender, class and ability have influenced how matters within education are viewed by education professionals (Gee, 2000); how identity can be defined in terms of a sense of belonging in the classroom felt by learners (Faircloth, 2009; Kaplan & Flum, 2012); motivation and the link to connecting identity with learning (Faircloth, 2012; Kaplan & Flum, 2009). This study focuses on sharing the lived experiences of identity development among learners who experience academic challenges at school. According to the DBE’s guidelines, learners who experience academic challenges are promoted for social reasons, so they are allowed to go to the next grade, although they have not met the promotion requirements for the current grade. Alternatively, they are retained, which means that they are held back in their current grade for another year, because they do not meet the minimum promotion requirements for a grade. Studies that criticise grade retention and social promotion do so because they have led to an increase in stress, low social confidence, substance abuse and violent behaviour in

many learners. Thus these learners become unmotivated and disengaged, and there is a possibility that they will drop out of school. There is also a possibility that they turn to bullying as a perpetrator or are on the receiving end of bullying as a victim (Belot & Vandenberghe, 2014; Jing, 2015; Lynch, 2013; Norton, 2011; Wright, 2009). This study will focus on the journey to identity development experienced by learners who have received either grade retention or social promotion as an intervention for their academic challenges.

### **1.3.1 Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to understand and describe the experiences of identity development among high school learners who are underachieving and have been promoted to or retained in their current grade. This is to gain a deeper understanding of how their learning difficulties affect their psychosocial experiences and whether these experiences affect their future goals and plans.

The study aims to give these learners a platform to express their experiences from the perspective of their own worlds and to demonstrate to what extent these experiences impact on their decision making and their beliefs in themselves.

### **1.3.2 Research Goals**

The goal of the study is to develop intervention strategies that would assist these learners to form positive identities despite them struggling academically.

## **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

What do underachieving learners experience on the journey towards identity development?

1. How does current academic performance contribute to how the learners view themselves?
2. Does the learner's view of themselves influence their career aspirations?
3. Does the learners' involvement in their communities express their view of themselves?



## **1.5 THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

Research is “a process of systematic inquiry that is designed to collect, analyse, interpret and use data to understand, describe, predict, or control an educational or psychological phenomenon or to empower individuals in such contexts” (Mertens, 1998, p. 25). The process of research into the phenomenon under study was necessary as this study aimed to understand and describe the experience of identity development amongst underachieving learners.

### **1.5.1 Research Paradigm**

A research paradigm, as defined by Johnson and Christensen (2000, p. 79), is “a perspective based on a set of assumptions, concepts, values and practices that are held by a community of researchers”. Mertens (1998, p.156) defines it as “a way of looking at the world composed of certain philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking and action”. A paradigm is the thought process and view that the researcher will use to guide his or her research.

In this study, the researcher will employ an interpretivist paradigm, as this study aims to describe the experiences of those learners who are considered as underachievers at school. This paradigm is well suited for the study as an interpretivist researcher acknowledges that a research problem occurs in a social context and should therefore “be studied in those contexts and sets out subjectively to understand social constructs” (Pather & Remenyi, 2004, p. 143). The researcher in this study aimed to represent the subjective experiences of learners who are faced by challenges at school. “Understanding is the main role of the interpretivist and never prediction” (Pather & Remenyi, 2004, p. 144).

The goal in interpretivism is “an understanding of a particular situation or context much more than the discovery of universal laws” (Willis, 2007, p. 39). The learners in this study will be understood in their context, and this will inform the development of an intervention that speaks to their particular experiences.

### **1.5.2 Research Design**

“Qualitative research is often exploratory, that is, it is often used when little is known about a certain topic or when an inductive approach is deemed more appropriate to

learn more about the topic” (Johnson & Christensen, 2000, p. 41). The researcher aims to embark on an inductive process and thus makes use of qualitative research. Inductive approach means that the researcher does not begin with a theory of the learners’ experiences. Experiences are subjective thus vary from one person to another. For the purposes of this study it was suitable to embark on a qualitative study so as gain an in-depth understanding of the individual experiences of the participants.

The type of qualitative study to be used is a case study. Characteristics of a case study, as stated by Willis (2007, p. 52), are “particularistic, naturalistic, thick descriptive data and inductive”. This case study takes an intensive approach, which is where “one phenomenon is looked at through a handful of instances in order to study it in greater depth” (Swanborn, 2010, p. 43). These characteristics make the case study a more suitable approach for this study, as they show how it helps to establish data that helps to answer this study’s research question.

### **1.5.3 Research Methodology**

I planned to use qualitative research methods for this study. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews where the questions were open-ended. There was also a drawing activity, where the participant would express his/her views of their participation in their communities. I asked participants to draw a picture of an important event that took place in their community and show the role that he/she played in this event. Then I asked participants to draw a picture of an event they predict will take place in 10 years’ time, which will be just as important as the one in the first picture. This was to show the role they predict they will play in this future event. Finally, we spoke about these pictures, in order to unpack their views on sense of belonging and their influence on their community.

The last part of data collection was carried out by means of observations. These took place during the school day. The school only has one class for grade 9. There are two grade 10 classes. Grade 10 research participants came from both grade 10 classes. Each day, I had the opportunity to do two classroom observations, and I also observed the learners during their break, as the school has an hour long break. The first classroom observation was held before break and the second observation was held after break. Before starting with observations, I discussed and clarified the purpose of the classroom observations with the educators this was to explain that I would not be

there to observe them, rather, the purpose was to see how the learners selected for this study interacted with their classmates as well as with their educators. However, the educators were not given names of learners I was observing. The school has a learner nutrition programme where learners go to the kitchen to collect their lunch. By observing this process, it assisted me to establish how the participants interact with learners other than their classmates and with figures of authority other than their own educators. Notes of observations conducted during the break were written fifteen minutes before the end of break.

#### **1.5.4 Research Methods**

This research was targeted at underachieving learners in grades 9 and 10. To be selected for this study, the learner had to have been promoted to the next grade, grade 9 or grade 10. Alternatively, the learner was retained in the grade as they had not met the promotion requirements for the grade.

##### ***1.5.4.1 Selection of Participants***

Participants in this study were learners who had not met the minimum promotion requirements and were promoted to the next grade for social reasons or retained in the grade. Research has been conducted on the effectiveness of grade retention and social promotion on academic performance (Im, Hughes, Kwok, Puckett, Cerda, 2013; Reschly & Christenson, 2013; Tingle, 2012; Wu, West & Hughes, 2010; Yoshino, 2012), and they share different views on the effectiveness of these intervention methods that have become popular as remediation for poor academic performance.

Four learners in grade 9 and four learners in grade 10 were included in this study. One of the reasons for including grade 9 learners in this study is that they moved into a new school environment the previous year and met new teachers who did not necessarily know about their learning barriers. The grade 10 learners are included in this study because they are moving towards grade 12, and they may be experiencing anxiety about their grade 12 final exams. These learners are aware that they have been promoted to the next grade or retained in a grade, as they did not achieve the required pass mark.

The promotion schedule is an official document where the class teacher records all of the learners' marks. This document also indicates whether the learner is ready to

progress or is not yet ready to progress to the next grade. Other information found in this document is the number of years a learner has spent in a grade and the number of years the learner has been in the phase (please see key terms at the end of this chapter for a definition of this term). According to the DBE's policy (National Education Policy Act, 1996), learners should not remain in the same phase for longer than four years, so that they progress through school within the same age cohort.

The researcher requested access to the promotion schedules for grades 8, 9 and 10 from the year 2017. This helped to identify learners who did not meet the promotion requirements, but were promoted to grades 9 and 10. These documents were also used to identify learners who were retained in grades 9 and 10.

The original promotion schedule documents were submitted to the circuit office at the end of the year and the school principal kept copies of the originals at the school. This document was accessed with the permission of the school principal. The reason for using the principal's copy was to avoid using educators to identify learners in their classes who might have difficulties in learning, as this could embarrass the learners.

When learners were identified by means of the promotion schedule, they were invited individually to speak to the researcher in the school's office. It is the practice of the school that learners are called to the office by the school's secretary. The researcher used this method to contact the participants to avoid other learners' curiosity about why certain individuals were called to the office. Next, the researcher explained to each learner that she was interested in learning about the life experiences of people, and in particular, teenagers' experiences at school, their identity development and their community involvement. Then the researcher requested that the learners shared their experiences with her. Those who agreed were asked to inform their parents about the study and that the researcher requested a meeting with the parents or guardians at their homes to explain more about the study. This meant firstly that the learners needed to agree to participate in the research, and secondly that their parents or guardians were also asked to give their consent for the learners to participate in this study. If learners gave their assent, but their parents or guardian did not give their consent too, then the learners were not included in this study.

#### **1.5.4.2 Data Collection Method**

During the collection of data, focus was on the experiences of the research participants.

The researcher spoke to each participant individually to find out how his/her difficulties at school had affected the following:

- Identity: this was explored by looking at how the participants have configured their self-identity as a result of their academic challenges;
- Goals and goalsetting: this was discussed by focusing on career choice and other dreams the participants would like to pursue for themselves;
- Community involvement: this was explored by asking for the participants' opinions about their community, their own role in the community as teenagers, how they perceive their role later on in life as adults, and their overall sense of belonging to their community.

"Participant observation reveals what people think and shows the cultural meanings they use daily. It offers a chance to step outside our narrow cultural backgrounds, to set aside our socially inherited ethnocentrism, if only for a brief period, and to apprehend the world from the viewpoint of other human beings who live by different meaning systems" (Spradley, 1980, p. 64). The researcher used observations as a way to see participants' actions and collaborate the observations with what the participants said during the interview. The researcher will also make use of a drawing activity which will give the participants an opportunity to further express their views of themselves in society.

#### **1.5.4.3 Data Analysis**

To analyse the data, qualitative research methods were used. Recordings from the interviews and the drawing activities were transcribed and translated into English by the researcher. The data, including notes from observations, was analysed and interpreted using thematic content analysis. Codes that the researcher pre-identified as important were identity, goal setting and community involvement. Thus data was found on how identities were formed, the participants' goals and how they carried out their community involvement. In addition, new codes that pertained to the process of identity development emerged from the data analysis and were included in this study. No descriptors were used that could lead to the identification of the school or any of

the participants, and pseudonyms were used to refer to information given by specific individuals.

## **1.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

As the study involved working with minors from a disadvantaged community, the researcher was mindful of the ethical considerations this raised. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, it also required that the ethics be considered thoroughly. Hence the researcher's first act to ensure confidentiality was the request to access the promotion schedule on her own, but only after the principal's permission was obtained. This meant that the researcher communicated with the principal alone to obtain information that pertained to the research and did not rely on the school's educators to identify participants. Consent was required from both the children and their parents or caregivers. The minors also needed to assent to the study: if a minor's parents consented to the research, but he/she did not assent, then this learner was excluded from the study. Consent forms needed to be explained verbally by the researcher in order to ensure informed consent by parents or guardians who might be illiterate. A recording of the session where the researcher explained to the parents what the research entailed was made. Anonymity and confidentiality was ensured by not using the names or any descriptions that could reveal the identity of the participants and their families. Before selecting participants, the researcher was also granted permission by the KwaZulu-Natal DoE to conduct this research at schools. Another ethical aspect to consider was that the researcher was working with members from a vulnerable community, therefore she had to take care not to exploit their vulnerability. Participants were also informed that they were allowed to withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable at any point.

The researcher used observations as part of the research methodology, which also raised ethical considerations. This meant that the researcher had to safeguard participants' rights, interests, and sensitivities, and discussed with each participant what she included in her observation notes about him/her, after all the observations were done. By doing so, this allowed the participant to decide what the researcher was permitted to include in her data analysis. The researcher held an information session

with the educators before starting her observations, where she explained to the educators what the purpose of the observations was. In addition, the researcher was engaged moderately as a participant in this study, and had to maintain a balance between being an insider and an outsider, as she was a bystander during the lessons and a participant during break times.

## **1.7 KEY TERMS**

The meaning a reader attaches to a word affects their interpretation and understanding of the text that they are reading. The following terms have been used throughout this text and the meaning the researcher attaches to each word has been clarified in order to assist the reader's understanding of the researcher's stance.

### **1.7.1 Learning barriers**

That which restricts, blocks or impedes the progress or achievement of acquiring new and enduring information in school

### **1.7.2 Identity development**

The progression of characteristics that are ultimately recognised, by peers; family and community, as intrinsic features of the individual. The identity of an individual is influenced by their interactions with their surroundings. Positive interactions lead to positive identification and negative interactions may result in either negative identification or avoidance of certain settings, environments or activities.

### **1.7.3 Underachievement**

The South African DoE uses a 7-point rating scale to indicate a learner's achievement. Achievement is recorded as follows:

**Table 1.1: Scale of achievement from the National Curriculum Statement**

Percentage	Level	Comment
80-100	7	Outstanding Achievement
70-79	6	Meritorious Achievement
60-69	5	Substantial Achievement

50-59	4	Adequate Achievement
40-49	3	Moderate Achievement
30-39	2	Elementary Achievement
0-29	1	Not Achieved

(Adapted from NATIONAL POLICY PERTAINING TO THE PROGRAMME AND PROMOTION REQUIREMENTS OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM STATEMENT GRADES R – 12, 2017, p. 10)

If a learner's work is rated at Level 1 in any subject, then he/she has underachieved for that grade.

**1.7.4 Grade retention:** As stated by the National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12 (2017, p. xi) the retaining of a learner in a grade for which he/she has not fulfilled the minimum promotion requirements. The aim of this intervention is to give the learner another chance to acquire the knowledge that they were unable to learn in a particular year.

**1.7.5 Social Promotion:** As stated by the National Department of Education of South Africa (National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R – 12, 2017, p. xi), this refers to the promotion of a learner, who has not achieved the minimum promotion requirements, from one grade to the next in order to keep him/her within the age cohort.

**1.7.6 Phase:** This refers to a group of grades, which are as follows:

Foundation phase: Grades R - 3

Intermediate phase: Grades 4 - 6

Senior phase: Grades 7 - 9

Further Education and Training: Grades 10 - 12

(Adapted from NATIONAL POLICY PERTAINING TO THE PROGRAMME AND PROMOTION REQUIREMENTS OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM STATEMENT GRADES R – 12, 2017, p.6, 12, 20, 29)



## **1.8 Conclusion**

This study seeks to understand identity development amongst learners who have experienced grade retention and social promotion. Grade retention and social promotion are intervention strategies used to improve the academic achievement of underperforming learners.

In the chapters to follow I will further define these strategies and discuss research on their effectiveness; discuss the theoretical framework used in the study and the research process undertaken. I will conclude with a discussion of the findings and recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The DoE's National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements [NPPPPR] of the National Curriculum Statement Grade R-12 (2017) defines the minimum outcomes and standards as follows: it shows the minimum level which a learner must attain in terms of the content assessment requirements for all subjects listed in the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12. These minimum outcomes and standards are the benchmark that determines whether a learner has achieved the expected outcomes or not in their current grade. They also determine whether a learner will be progressed (social promotion), retained (grade retention) or promoted to the next grade. Progression refers to the advancement of a learner from one grade to the next in spite of the learner not having complied with all the promotion requirements. The use of progression is also to prevent a learner from being retained in a phase for a period exceeding four years as stipulated in the Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools (1998). Retention, the repetition of a grade due to non-satisfaction of the grade's promotion requirements, should happen in only one year per school phase where necessary (DoE National Policy Act, 1996, Act No. 27 of 1996, Admission Policy for Ordinary Schools, 1998). The admission policy also states that learners should progress with their age cohort, because repetition of grades seldom results in significant increases in learning attainment and frequently has the opposite result (Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools, 1998). Promotion means the movement of a learner from one grade to the next, where a learner meets the minimum required level of achievement per subject in a particular grade, as well as complying with the promotion requirements of that grade as found in the NPPPPR (2017).

This study focused on learners in grades 9 and 10. These grades are part of two phases of the education system in South Africa: grades 7 – 9 is part of the Senior Phase; and, grades 10 – 12 are part of the Further Education and Training Phase. It is in these phases that a learner undergoes Erikson's "identity versus role confusion" (Erikson, 1965, p.235) stage. Each phase has its own promotion requirements that

each learner must fulfil in order to be promoted to the next grade (NPPPPR, 2017). Achievement is ranked according to percentages and levels as follows:

**Table 2.1: Promotional requirements for Grades 7 - 9 extracted from National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R - 12, 2017**

<b>PROMOTION REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADES 7 - 9</b>
<p><b>(1)</b> Learners in Grades 7 - 9 will be promoted from grade to grade if they have offered nine (9) and have complied with the promotion requirements in eight (8) of the subjects provided the School-Based Assessment component of the ninth subject has been completed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Adequate Achievement (Level 4) in one language at Home Language level;</li> <li>(b) Moderate Achievement (Level 3) in the second required official language at First Additional Language level;</li> <li>(c) Moderate Achievement (Level 3) in Mathematics;</li> <li>(d) Moderate Achievement (Level 3) in any three (3) of the other required subjects;</li> <li>(e) At least an Elementary Achievement (Level 2) in any two (2) of the other required subjects.</li> </ul> <p><b>(2)</b> A learner may only be retained once in the Senior Phase to prevent the learner being retained in this phase for longer than four years.</p> <p><b>(3)</b> A learner who is not ready to function at the expected level and who has been retained in the previous phases for four (4) years or more and who is likely to be retained again in the third phase for four (4) years or more, should receive the necessary support in order to achieve an appropriate level of competence in order to progress to the next grade.</p>

**Table 2.2: Promotional requirements Grades 10 - 12 extracted from National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R - 12, 2017**

<b>PROMOTION REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADES 10 - 12</b>
<p>(1) Learners in Grades 10 - 12 will be promoted from grade to grade if they have offered and completed the School-Based Assessment, Practical Assessment Tasks, where applicable, oral assessment and end-of-year examination requirements in not fewer than seven (7) subjects:</p> <p>(a) Achieved 40% in three subjects, one of which is an official language at Home Language level, and 30% in three subjects, provided the School-Based Assessment component is submitted in the subject failed</p> <p>(b) A condonation of a maximum of one (1) subject will only be applied to a Grade 12 candidate in the final National Senior Certificate examination, if such a candidate requires a maximum of 2%, either to obtain a pass at 30% or 40%. Such a condonation will be applied in only one subject, provided the application of the condonation allows the candidate to obtain the National Senior Certificate qualification.</p> <p><b>(2)</b> Considering this, progression to either Grade 10 or Grade 11 is subject to the following criteria:</p> <p><b>(a)</b> the learner must have failed to satisfy the promotion requirements of either Grade 10 or Grade 11 and repeated either Grade 10 or Grade 11 by means of one of the following scenarios:</p> <p>(i) must have repeated Grade 10 and was unable to meet the promotion requirements at the end of the second year in Grade 10; or</p> <p>(ii) must have met Grade 10 promotion requirements, but was unsuccessful in meeting the Grade 11 promotion requirements after a period of two years; or</p> <p>(iii) must have been unsuccessful in meeting Grade 10 promotion requirements at the end of the first year, was progressed to Grade 11 the following year but was unable to meet the Grade 11 promotion requirements at the end of the first year in Grade 11; and</p> <p><b>(b)</b> pass four of the seven subjects, offered for the National Senior Certificate, comprising:</p> <p>(i) the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) and</p> <p>(ii) three other approved subjects, including Life Orientation, selected from Groups A and/or B in Annexure B as contemplated in paragraph 27(1) and (2); and</p>

(c) attended school on a regular basis. Absenteeism in excess of 20 days, without a valid reason, will disqualify the learner from being progressed. If the learner has been absent for more than 20 days, without a valid reason, this constitutes irregular attendance; and

(d) complied with the prescribed School-Based Assessment (SBA) requirements for all subjects offered, including the failed subjects for that academic year

## 2.2 GRADE RETENTION

Grade retention is an intervention aimed at learners who do not fulfil the pass requirements of the grade they are currently in at school. These learners are kept in the same grade for another year with the purpose of getting a second opportunity to acquire the knowledge they need for the following grade. Belot & Vandenberghe (2014, p.75) state that the “threat of grade retention was expected to increase the number of learners who reach grade 10 without repeating but this was not the case as numbers dropped for both the at risk group and the group of learners not previously retained”.

Those in favour of retention argue that retained learners are better accepted by their peers than socially promoted learners, as retained learners are seen as more capable by their new classmates (Jing, 2015). Chom, Hughes, West and Im (2015) argue that there is no evidence that retention in elementary grades impairs the learners’ general motivation for educational attainment, therefore retention does not harm the learners’ educational success. Teachers and peers expect that learners repeating the grade will do well and knowing of this expectation increases a learner’s value of education (Chom et al., 2015). McCoy and Reynolds (1999) are also of the view that retention at a younger age results in positive perceptions of school in the learner. However, McCoy and Reynolds (1999) also express the idea that retention plus strategies to assist the retained learner during the year they repeat a grade is more effective than the learner simply repeating a grade without support in the areas he/she could not achieve the previous year.

A survey of the literature also reveals mixed views in terms of the academic and psychosocial benefits of retention. Klapproth et al. (2016) state that academic retention has short-term benefits for the learners i.e. improved academic performance, although

these benefits diminish over time. In addition, grade R retention is more effective, as “skills developed at this age are more responsive to retention as an intervention” (Vandecandelaere et al., 2016, p.86). However, other research has shown the ineffectiveness of retention in achieving its aims, as retention may have the following results: an increase in learners’ stress; a lowering of their social confidence; learners abuse substances, with an increase in violent behaviour; the learners become unmotivated and disengaged, so that they drop-out of school; and, learners are involved in bullying, either as a perpetrator or as a victim (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2013; Fine et al., 2003; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Jing, 2015; Lynch, 2013; Norton, 2011). According to Fine and Davis (2003), the grade at which learners are retained also affects the likelihood of their enrolling in post-secondary education, as those who still complete high school though previously retained are less likely to register for a four-year degree. Retention in elementary and middle school, the Foundation and Intermediate phases in South Africa’s education system, may result in negative effects that will continue into adulthood.

Research found that retention does little to solve the root problems of poor achievement (Bosman, 2005; Frey, 2005; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2006; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). Learners are exposed to the same instructional approaches that did not support their achievement in the previous year, and the learner approaches learning in a similar way too. There is no additional support provided to assist the learner in the year that they repeat a grade and many retained learners do not sustain, over time, the improvements they might make in the year that they are retained (Belot & Vandenberghe, 2014; Bonvin et al., 2008; Lamote et al., 2014; Lynch, 2013; Norton, 2011; Wright, 2009). The negative effects of retention on the learner are sustained over time. Learners not supported in overcoming the academic challenge that resulted in them being retained will come to face that academic challenge in the next grade when having to learn new information. Researchers argue that grade retention may result in broadening the gap between a learner’s capability and their academic achievement (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2016; Martin, 2009; Vandecandelaere et al., 2016). Therefore, grade retention does not bring forth the academic performance that some researchers claim that it produces (Klapproth et al., 2016). Vandecandelaere et al. (2016) state that grade retention is more likely to leave the learner with labels that

carry negative connotations and the learner internalising these labels. Nalavany et al. (2011, p. 75) also argues that as adults, retained learners would most likely be on public assistance programs, unemployed or imprisoned. These studies show that there is need for research into the psychosocial impact of grade retention. Therefore, social promotion and grade retention, as interventions for poor academic performance, do not bring academic change that is sought out by the education system. Previously retained learners are not reaching a level of academic achievement that opens doors to a life without government support.

### **2.3 SOCIAL PROMOTION (Progression)**

Social promotion is the practice of promoting learners to the next grade, although they do not meet the requirements in order to pass the grade that they are currently in at school. The reason for this decision is to keep them within their age cohort (Frey, 2005, p.341). Learners are promoted with the intention of providing them with additional interventions for work they did not learn in the previous grade. The aim of these interventions is to help the learners catch up on what they were unable to learn in the previous grade (Frey, 2005, p. 340; NPPPPR, 2017, p.xi). Social promotion is a practice of the child-centered curriculum (Frey, 2005, p. 340).

Research on the effectiveness of social promotion is confined to a comparison between groups in studies on retention (Frey, 2005, p.341). It is the results of these studies that are used to inform views on social promotion. As found with studies on grade retention, there are differing views as to whether social promotion is effective or not. Those in favour of social promotion state that, unlike retention, social promotion carries more advantages important to academic achievement, such as better personal behaviour, higher self-esteem and a lower risk of learners dropping out of school (Jing, 2015; Norton, 2011). Socially promoted learners have also been found to show a more positive self-concept in comparison to retained learners (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2013; Klapproth et al., 2016; Martin, 2009). So research in support of early social promotion argues that it impacts positively of the psychosocial wellbeing of the learner thus having a positive impact on achievement, whereas only early grade retention has positive impact on achievement but opening up to more negative impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of the learner.

However, social promotion is also seen as not as effective as its supporters claim, although it is practiced in many countries (Frey, 2005; Jing, 2015; Lynch, 2013). When a learner is socially promoted, then they are not equipped with the fundamentals that they require in order to master the grade that they are promoted to in a school, the result is that social promotion might be more damaging both academically and emotionally than retention (Lynch, 2013, p.293). In most cases, social promotion is “a thorn in the side for administrators and educators attempting to raise achievement through higher expectations for all learners” (Frey, 2005, p.341). Learners are not challenged to work for their place in the next grade by improving their grades.

## **2.4 IDENTITY**

This study uses the term identity ‘development’ and not identity ‘formation’. The meaning of ‘formation’ implies the idea of knowing before-hand what the outcome of a process will be, whereas ‘development’ suggests that the outcome is unknown, as it is the result of experiences that take place during a process. The researcher was uncertain whether academic performance would have any influence on the research participants’ identity when at the beginning of this research. Thus, the researcher uses the term ‘development’ in order to understand the journey in the participants’ words and experiences.

### **2.4.1 Defining identity**

Definitions of identity vary according to the lens you are using. Jeznik (2015, p. 29) discusses the philosophical, sociological and psychological definitions of identity, highlighting the different lenses available in each. “Philosophically, the anti-realists see identity as a construct without real foundation, which is created through practices, discourses and relationships” (Jeznik, 2015, p. 30). On the other hand, realists, such as Taylor, define identity as a “question of human responsibility which can be understood as the individual’s adaptation to the social norms, values and expectations that individuals should internalise in a process of identification” (Taylor 2004 as cited in Jeznik, 2015, p.29). In sociology, identity is seen as “a reflective organisation of the individual’s life story” (Jeznik, 2015, p.31). According to psychology, “identity is defined under psychoanalytic theory or psychosocial theory” (Jeznik, 2015, p. 32). For the



purposes of this study identity is understood from a psychological perspective, more specifically, by using a psychosocial theoretical approach. Psychosocial theories such as that of Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson give a more comprehensive theory of development. Sigmund Freud uses ages to show how development takes place whilst Erikson gives an even more concise theory using the 8 stages of development (Shaffer, 1999, p. 33). For the purposes of the study Erik Erikson's theory better assisted in identifying the sample and expectations of their development when unpacking identity development.

Erikson (1965, p.235) describes the beginnings of identity as what “bridges the stages of childhood when the bodily self and the parental images are given their cultural connotations” and bridging the “stage of young adulthood when a variety of social roles become available and increasingly coercive” (Erikson, 1965, p.235). In describing the differences between id, ego and superego, Erikson (1965, p. 234) states that the id and superego are at far ends of a continuum, with the ego being a balance between the two. The id “pursues excessive wishes concerning things we wish we could do or wish we had done; the superego is the oppressive force of the conscience which brings in thoughts of oughtness” (Erikson, 1965, p. 230). The ego is the “state of equilibrium, a resting place between the id and superego, the least offensive state and the area in which human beings are more themselves” (Erikson, 1965, p. 230). Slee et al. (2012, p.62) state that according to Erikson the identity of an individual contains three elements, namely, “a conscious sense of individual uniqueness; an unconscious striving for continuity of experience and a solidarity with group ideals”.

Identity plays an important role in promoting wellbeing, as some studies have shown that a well-rounded identity is associated with high psychosocial functioning (Meca et al., 2015). Markovitch et al. (2017) state that identity is the central process of human development, because it is about building a sense of self thus it is related to psychological functioning, academic functioning, personal relationships and personality pathology.

Identity is seen as answer to questions such as: “Who am I?”; “What am I doing with my life?”; “What kind of relationships do I want?”; “What kind of work do I want to do?”;

“What are my beliefs?”; “How do you think of yourself, individually and in a collective situation?”; and, “How do you act in both interpersonal and intergroup interactions?” (Adams, 1996; Schwartz et al., 2013; Gee, 2000; Luyckx & Robitscheck, 2014; Schwartz, Luyckx & Vignoles, 2011).

Luyckx and Robitscheck (2014) identify personal growth initiative as a predictor of identity. Through processes of exploration (actively questioning identity alternatives and experimenting with various social roles) and commitment (being dedicated) identity is acquired. According to Luyckx and Robitscheck (2014) personal growth is change towards self-actualisation and it is intentional and purposeful. When the change is unintentional, then the individual displays lower levels of self-efficacy and mastery, in comparison to when change is intentional.

#### **2.4.2 Theoretical framework: Erik Erikson’s Developmental Stages**

Erik Erikson’s developmental stages have been the driving force for much research around identity. Erikson divides lifespan into eight stages with each stage presenting a situation in which an individual orientates him/herself according to two opposing poles (Erikson, 1965 & 1971; Louw, van Ede & Louw, 1992; Shaffer, 1999; Slee et al., 2012). Within the individual, maturation brings new needs and possibilities, while society sets corresponding expectations and offers certain possibilities (Shaffer, 1999). This brings about a crisis, to which an individual has to orientate himself or herself. Erik Erikson proposes that the solution to the crisis is not in selecting one over the other but in finding a synthesis between the two (Erikson, 1980; Louw et al., 1992; Shaffer, 1999; Slee et al., 2012). An important aspect of Erikson’s theory is that at each stage the individual is faced with all the crises, but a different crisis dominates at each stage (Erikson, 1965). The other crises are beneath the surface. Successful resolution of the crisis at one stage will lead to the resolution of the next crisis (Erikson, 1965; Louw et al., 1999; Shaffer, 1999; Slee, 2012;). In his exploration of the stages of development Erik Erikson (1965, p.234) identified adolescence as the stage in which identity dominates and calls it the “identity vs role confusion stage” (Please refer to table 2.3 for further details). During this stage the individual will “re-fight many of the battles of earlier years”, they will be concerned with “what they appear to be in the

eyes of others as compared to what they feel they are” also questioning “how to connect roles and skills cultivated in earlier stages” (Erikson, 1965, p. 235).

Acquiring an identity is explained in many processes that are within the individual, social and relational spheres (Sedikides & Brewer, as cited in Meca et al., 2015; Schwartz, Luyckx & Vignoles, 2011). According to Schwartz et al. (2011), at the individual level the emphasis is on the individual’s agentic role in creating or discovering his or her own identity. Identity at the individual level is defined by goals, values, beliefs, self-esteem, standards for behaviour and decision making (Schwartz, Luyckx & Vignoles, 2011). The need to acquire an identity, as explained by Erik Erikson, is experienced in adolescence and “consists of individual characteristics (who am I?); social identity (to which groups do I belong?) and values and ideals (What do I wish to achieve?)” (Louw et al., 1992, p.53).

Marcia (1967) enabled further research to develop based on Erik Erikson’s theory by looking at identity as an intersection between two identity processes, namely, exploration (active consideration of various identity alternatives) and commitment (selection and adherence to one or more identity alternatives). Marcia (1967, p.119) proposed that there are four identity status categories that the processes of exploration and commitment lead to, namely: “Identity Achievement (set of commitments enacted after a period of exploration); Moratorium (state of active exploration with few commitments); Foreclosure (set of commitments enacted without prior exploration; and, Diffusion (absence of commitments coupled with lack of interest in exploration)”. In the process of an individual developing an identity a number of activities and views will appeal to them over the years at varying levels. “Establishing identity commitments following a stage of exploration is assumed to lead to a feeling of having an integrated sense of self” (Côte & Levine, as cited in Meca et al., 2015, p.328). Erikson (1971, p.179) referred to this stage as leading to the healthy personality, that is, a personality that has “weathered inner and outer conflicts with an increased sense of inner unity, an increase in good judgement and an increase in the capacity to do well”.

Individuals, who are considered to have reached “Identity Achieved”, are identifiable by their balanced thinking and mature interpersonal relationships (Marcia, 1967; Schwartz et al., 2015). While those individuals who are labelled as “Moratoriums” are

identifiable by their openness and curiosity, as well as by depression and poor wellbeing (Marcia, 1967; Schwartz et al., 2015). The characteristics of individuals who have reached “Foreclosure” are self-satisfaction and low levels of internalising symptoms, whereas low self-esteem and absence of self-direction and agency characterise individuals who are classified fitting into the category of “Diffusion” (Marcia, 1966; Schwartz et al., 2015).

Marcia’s identity statuses are a valuable way of studying identity, although they have been critiqued. Scharzt et al. (2015) identify two critiques of the Identity Status Model: the first is that this model does not take into consideration the context, whereas Erikson considers that identity is developed through transactions between individual and their social context. Secondly, the simplistic nature of the status model assumes that there is a finalisation of identity by early adulthood.

The current study aims to understand how academic performance influences identity development for adolescents who do not perform well in school. In the stage previous to identity versus role confusion, industry versus inferiority, school is a very important role player as the child learns to use skills and tools at this stage. The focus of development becomes more on the outer being than the inner being, as happened in previous stages (Erikson, 1965 & 1971). If the crisis at industry vs inferiority is not resolved a sense of inadequacy and inferiority develops and this becomes the stance at which they begin the identity vs role confusion stage (Erikson, 1965 & 1971; Louw et al., 1992; Shaffer, 1999; Slee et al., 2012). According to Erikson (1965, p. 233): “If he (the child) despairs of his tools and skills or of his status amongst his tool partners (classmates) he may be discouraged from identification with them and with a section of the tool world”. A loss of interest in engaging with surroundings due to not succeeding in the previous stage impacts on identity development. Identity development requires the individual to explore possibilities open to them and committing to those they identify with the most.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, there were studies conducted with adults who did not do well at school, who reported on how events that took place in school have influenced their behaviour in adulthood. This showed the need to understand the influence of school on learners’ performance, especially where they were labelled as underachievers.

**Table 2.3: Erikson's stages of psychosocial development (adapted from Shaffer, 1999, p. 45)**

PSYCHOSOCIAL STAGE	CHALLENGE
Basic trust versus mistrust	Developing a sense of the world as a safe and a good place
Autonomy versus shame and doubt	Realising that one is an independent person and can make decisions
Initiative versus guilt	Developing a willingness to try new things and to handle failure
Industry versus inferiority	Learning basic skills and how to work with others
Identity versus identity confusion	Developing a lasting, integrated sense of self
Intimacy versus isolation	Committing to another in a loving relationship
Generativity versus stagnation	Contribute to younger people, through childrearing, childcare or other productive work
Integrity versus despair	Viewing one's life as satisfactory and worth living

## 2.5 SCHOOL AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

The environment within which an individual grows has been found to shape their identity development (Louw et al., 1999; Markovitch et al., 2017;). Studies have looked into the impact of parenting on identity development (Markovitch et al., 2017), school curriculum and teaching methods and how it influences identity (Faircloth, 2009; Gee, 2000; Jeznik, 2015). These studies have found that these factors do influence identity and results vary among individuals. This study goes deeper into the roots of the school environment by seeking to understand the influence of a learner's achievement on his/her journey to identity development. Markovitch et al. (2017) state that the increase in importance of the social context as adolescents negotiate their identity regarding peers, parents and other role models suggests an increased role for environmental factors in identity development. Future studies should address the developmental pathways of genetic and environmental influences on identity development.

School falls within the person-in-context feature of identity. Within the ecosystemic design of social context, school forms part of the micro-environment. The NDE in South Africa has constructed norms/ideologies and values for the school system: the features of these norms/ideologies and values are communicated through symbols, such as grades; the meaning of each phase and school level, namely primary, secondary and high school, is explained; and, expectations, such as learning outcomes, knowledge gained in each grade per subject, are clarified (DoE, 2005). The goals of education go beyond the objectives of a high-grade point average, conceptual change, critical thinking or the acquisition of self-regulation skills, and should be conceptualised in terms of broad developmental goals (Kaplan & Flum, 2009). Schwartz et al. (2013) state that the transition from an industrial to a technological economy has had a major impact on society: examples of this transition are the ways it has affected academics, relationships, sexuality and religion. One of the impacts on education has been the early age children enter the schooling system. The result is that much of the child's development takes place in the school environment. With both parents working in many families, the stages which Erikson identified as taking place within the parent-child relationship (before exposure to tools and skill), namely, "Basic Trust versus Mistrust, Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt, Initiative versus Guilt" (see Table 2.3) are now experienced in day care, pre-grade R and grade R environments. Challenges to learning and behaviour are now usually noticed within the school environment. With this development taking place in the school environment, many researchers see the school as a place of great influence on the journey to identity development (Kaplan & Flum, 2009). Jeznik (2015) also uses recognition to understand school and the journey to identity development: a school should allow the expression and realisation of individuality despite differences among learners. But the use of medical diagnosis for learners with developmental disorders, for instance, does not allow an opportunity for the learner to explore their own identity.

Research into the impact of school on the learner has also looked at the relationships that are within the school and how they influence identity, a sense of belonging and motivation (Faircloth, 2009; Jeznik, 2015; Kaplan & Flum, 2009). Studies focusing on relationships in the school environment look at the learner-teacher relationship and peer relationships (Faircloth, 2009;; Jeznik, 2015). The

relationship between learners and teachers is important for the learners' connection to a class, their engagement and success. By using learning activities, this allows the learners to shape and express their own identity (Faircloth, 2009). Peer relationships are important to create a sense of belonging at school. By sharing ideas and learning who other people are, this process informs the developing sense of self and it locates a better fit socially (Faircloth, 2009).

## **2.6 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I discussed the literature which was consulted to clarify the concepts used in the study. I referred to South Africa's NDE's policy documents to clarify concepts such as achievement and underachievement; progression, retention and promotion. In addition, I examined the DoE's policies, which stipulated what the requirements are for a learner to achieve academically or to be considered a learner who has underachieved. Participants in this study are learners who underachieved according to the DoE's policies. The result was that either these learners were retained in their current grade or they were allowed to progress to the next grade.

The literature consulted on this topic allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the practices of retention and progression. The term "social promotion" was used when referring to the learners who met the criteria for progression. There were differing views shown in the literature on the appropriateness of either retention or progression. The NDE clearly stated its stance that learners should only repeat grades where necessary and that the repetition of one grade many times was not permissible (Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools, 1998). In addition, the DoE stated that promotion should not be the only method of intervention when implemented intervention but learners should receive further support from educators, peers and their families. it does not support the position that learners be automatically promoted (Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools, 1998).

This chapter also explored Erik Erikson's developmental stages theory as this study used his theoretical framework to understand the journey of identity development for the participants. Erikson's theory was relevant to the study, as it emphasised the

importance of the role played by the environment in identity development. This theory identified adolescence as a stage where a person began their identity related exploration (Erikson, 1963, 1968 & 1980), which made it appropriate for my research at schools.



## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

As stated in Chapter 1, the aim of this study is to understand the journey to identity development that is experienced by underachieving learners. This study was conducted on a group of learners in their teenage years, which is the stage in which the crisis “identity versus role confusion” (Erikson, 1965, p. 234) is prominent. The study focused on understanding the journey of identity development experienced by persons whose academic performance does not meet the promotion requirements as stated by NDE policy. According to the National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement (NPPPPRNCS) (2017), learners who do not meet the minimum outcomes and standards can either be “progressed” (social promotion) or “retained” (NPPPPRNCS, 2017, p. xi). Progression, referred to as social promotion in the literature, is the “advancement of a learner from one grade to the next, excluding Grade R, in spite of the learner not having complied with all the promotion requirements” (NPPPPRNCS, 2017, p. xi).

This chapter will focus on the research process undertaken to achieve the overall aim of the study. Ethical considerations which needed to be taken into account before, during and after the study will also be discussed.

#### 3.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

To begin, a second look into the research questions is needed as they guided the research process from paradigm to methods. The main research question was as follows:

What do underachieving learners experience on the journey towards identity development?

To guide the study various sub-questions accompanied the main question, which are:

1. How does academic performance contribute to how the learners view themselves currently?
2. Does the learner’s view of themselves influence their career aspirations?

3. Does the learners' involvement in their communities express their view of themselves?

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of the journey to identity development of the learners who did not meet the promotion requirements for their grade. The researcher wanted to understand and describe their experiences of identity development considering the learning challenges they experienced.

This section will give an outline of the research process and methods used in this study. It will also discuss the paradigm the researcher used to view the phenomena under study.

### **3.3 RESEARCH PARADIGM**

As stated in Chapter 1, a paradigm is the thought process and view that the researcher uses to guide his or her research. Johnson and Christensen (2017, p. 29) defined a paradigm as “a perspective based on a set of assumptions, concepts, values and practices that are held by a community of researchers”. For the purposes of this study the researcher adopted a qualitative paradigm. This allowed the researcher to engage in research practices allowing the collection of in-depth data.

Qualitative research is often used when little is known about a certain topic or when an inductive approach is deemed more appropriate to learn more about a topic (Maykut & Morehouse; 1994). Qualitative methods help to “make everyday activities of life in classrooms that often go unexamined but may offer explanations for how some students lose interest in engaging in formal schooling” (Kozleski, 2017, p. 24). The literature consulted revealed that social promotion and grade retention had insignificant impact on academic performance and a negative impact on psychosocial behaviour. However, the researcher was interested in discovering the influence academic performance has had on identity development. Maykut and Morehouse (1994, pp. 43) describe characteristics of qualitative research as including the following: “exploratory and descriptive focus; emergent design; a purposive sample; data collection in the natural setting; emphasis on human-as-instrument; the use of qualitative methods of data collection; early and ongoing inductive data analysis”. In this study the researcher sought to describe the experiences of the learners and collected data in the context in which the learners have had their experiences. The

researcher assumed a key role in collecting data and bringing meaning of the experiences of participants to light. In doing that the researcher worked within the scientific method and common research objectives of qualitative research (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Maree, 2013; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Mertens, 1998; Willis, 2007).

John Nieuwenhuis (as cited in Maree Kobus, 2013, p. 56) describes “naturalism, subjectivism, interpretivism and constructivism as research approaches falling under the umbrella term qualitative research”. In this study, the researcher used the interpretivist approach. The main principle under interpretivism is that “reality is socially constructed” (Mertens, 2005, p. 160; Walliman, 2006, p. 187). This approach is used to “explore people’s perceptions and keep focus on the experiences of the participant” (Giles, 2002, p. 209).

An approach to research is defined by three questions, namely, “an ontological question, epistemological question, and a methodological question” (Mertens, 1998, p. 11). Ontology of an approach is its “stance on how the nature of reality is understood” (Mertens, 2005, p.11). Willis’ (2007, p.51) description of interpretivism states that it “does not deny external physical reality but views it as a reality that can be known independently”. Interpretivist approach’s ontology of reality is that reality is socially constructed (Mertens, 1998, p. 11; Willis, 2007, p. 51). Within this approach the researcher’s goal is to understand participants’ multiple “social constructions of meaning and knowledge” (Mertens, 2005, p.11) around identity. In this study, the researcher had to acknowledge the difference in backgrounds between her and the research participants. In so doing she had to keep in mind that activities done at school and in society could hold different meanings for her and the participants due to social interactions that have taken place within their respective backgrounds. In examining ontology further, the researcher explored the subjective experiences of participants by using data collection methods that allowed them to express their views on their journey to identity development.

“Epistemology is concerned with how we know things and what we can regard as acceptable knowledge in a discipline” (Walliman, 2006, p.192). Mertens (2005, p.15) states the epistemological question as “What is the nature of the knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the would-be known?” The researcher had no

previous knowledge of the participants' subjective experiences, so she used research methods that allowed her to gain knowledge of their subjective experiences. "There are two ways of acquiring knowledge namely empiricism, gaining knowledge through sensory experience, and rationalism, gaining knowledge by reason" (Walliman, 2006, p.192). This study used an empiricist way of acquiring knowledge through inductive reasoning. Interpretivism allowed the researcher to understand the subjective meanings which individuals placed on their action.

Methodology is concerned with "how the researcher will obtain the knowledge they require" (Mertens, 1998, p. 14). Interpretivism uses qualitative methods from a stance that research is to be conducted through interaction between researcher and respondents (Mertens, 2005, p. 161). Methods used in this study required constant interaction between the researcher and the participants, which led to a varying in the style of interaction. The methods were rooted in "an analysis of language and meaning" being used to understand the data (Walliman, 2006, p. 48). The use of qualitative methods in the study, that is, interviews and observations; multiple case studies for better interpretations; the interactive approach to research; and, not having definitively predetermined questions to allow further probing. All of these approaches helped to bring out more "in-depth information" (Mertens, 1998, p. 163) and speaks to the "methodology of the interpretive approach" (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 48).

**Table 3.1: Characteristics of interpretivism (Cantrell, as cited in Thomas, 2010. p.309)**

FEATURE	DESCRIPTION
Ontology	Multiple realities exist due to the unique experiences, beliefs, perceptions, interpretations and knowledge people hold. These realities can be explored and made meaningful through human interaction and discussion in order to discover how people make sense of their social worlds.
Epistemology	Events are understood through the process of interaction with social contexts. Those active in the research process socially construct meaning and knowledge by experience in the natural setting. Researcher and participants form a symbiotic relationship based on conversation and listening in order to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences.
Methodology	Process of data collection Research is a product of the values of the researcher Semi-structured interviews, drawing activity and observations

### 3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

The following sections will discuss context and techniques. A research design is defined as a “strategic framework” by Durrheim (2006, p. 134); a “logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study’s initial research questions and ultimately conclusions” (Yin, 2014, p. 28). The research design serves as a “plan that guides research activity to ensure that sound conclusions are reached” (Durrheim, 2006, p. 134). Walliman (2006, p.186) refers to a research design as a “framework for the collection and analysis of data and subsequently indicates which research methods are appropriate”. Philliber, Schwab and Samsloss (as cited in Yin, 2014, p. 29) state that a research design is the “blueprint” of a study dealing with what questions to study; what data is relevant; what data to collect and how to analyse the results.

This study made use of case study as a research design. A case study is used “to study a social phenomenon within boundaries of one or few social systems using several data sources” (Swanborn, 2010, p. 22). In a case study, the researcher focuses on only “one specific instance of the phenomenon to study or a handful of instances in order to study a phenomenon in depth” (Swanborn, 2010, p. 22). During this research, the researcher made use of a handful of instances to study identity development. The case study was appropriate to this study, as the researcher sought to get insight into the participants’ worlds and to understand their experiences of identity development. With a case study, each case is studied “within its context (Swanborn, 2010, p.22). The researcher was interested in understanding each case in-depth.

According to Yin (2014, p. 29) the following components are important in a case study: “the study’s questions; propositions of the study; units of analysis; logic linking data to propositions and criteria for interpreting findings”. “The study’s questions; propositions and units of analysis” (Yin, 2014, p. 29) lead to identifying “data to be collected, logic linking data to propositions and criteria for interpreting findings lead to anticipating your case study analysis suggesting what can be done after data collection” (Rule & John, 2011, p. 24). This study’s question required exploring of subjective data, because the study’s propositions were to understand and describe the journey to identity development that the participants experienced. It also provided a platform for the participants to speak about their experiences in their own words. The study’s units of

analysis for this case study were the participants who had not met the promotion requirements for their current grade. A case study, as a research design, was appropriate for this study as it catered to the interpretation and understanding required by the question. It allowed the researcher to explore the subjective experiences that are the study's rationale.



**Figure 3.1: The research design of the current study**

## **3.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.5.1 Context for the study**

The aim of interpretivist research is to offer a perspective about a situation and to analyse the situation under study to provide insights into the way in which a particular

group of people make sense of their situation or the phenomena they encounter. With this aim in mind, the researcher did not attempt to manipulate the context, as participants were interviewed and observed within their context at a school selected for this research.

The participants were high school learners at a school in KwaZulu-Natal, where the learners do not pay school fees, because the school is classified as falling into Quintile 1. This means that the school depends on funding allocated by the DoE. For years, the children in this village in KwaZulu-Natal were without a high school that was close to their homes. The long walk to school made it difficult for some of the children to finish their schooling. As part of a development strategy, a primary school was built, then a few years later the high school was built, and finally a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). This ensured that learners in the area would receive free education up to tertiary level as the TVET offered National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding.

The school has an enrolment of 287 learners, 12 educators, a principal and an administration officer. There is only class for grades 8 and 9, but grades 10, 11 and 12 are split into two curriculum streams. The first stream has Mathematics, Accountancy, Life Sciences and Consumer Studies as subjects. The second stream has Mathematical Literacy; Business Studies; Economics and Dramatic Arts as subjects. These different subjects are added onto the languages (IsiZulu Home Language and English First Additional) and Life Orientation which all learners take.

Learners at this school walk to school: those who live furthest walk one and a half hours to get to school every day. Due to the school's Grade 12 pass rate (which is good) and the variety of subjects offered, which includes practical subjects like Dramatic Arts and Consumer Studies, many learners who live far from the school choose to walk the long distance to get to the school. The research participants were a mixture of learners who lived far from the school and those who lived closer to the school. Being a no fee school, the learners also received a cooked lunch at the school, which helped to address some of their nutritional needs. The learners did not buy their own stationery and textbooks, as these were provided at the beginning of every year by the DoE.

The research participants were learners who have experienced grade retention and social promotion (progression) during their years in school.

### **3.5.2 Selection of Research Participants**

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the participants in this study were learners who had experienced both grade retention and social promotion in their years at school. These learners were showing to have difficulties with school work, as their achievement was below the minimum promotion requirements that the DoE set out in the phases (NPPPPR, 2017, see pp. 27 & 37).

Participants were chosen for the sample by consulting the school's promotion schedule, after the principal granted the researcher permission to access it. The researcher went through the grade eight, nine and ten promotion schedules from 2017. From the grade eight promotion schedule, she identified learners who had been in the phase for three years already and thus were being progressed (socially promoted) to grade nine in 2018. In the grade nine promotion schedule, the researcher identified learners who were retained in the grade and those who had been in the phase for four years. Thus the latter group were being progressed (socially promoted) to grade ten. In the grade ten promotion schedule, the researcher identified learners who had been retained in this grade.

Walliman (2006, p. 229) defines sampling "as a process of selecting a small group of people from a large group". Social promotion and grade retention have become common interventions for learners who do not meet promotion requirements. The sample the researcher worked with was a small group from a large group of learners who had received these interventions. This study used non-probability sampling. The sample is not representative of the population of learners who are retained or socially promoted, thus the "findings thereof cannot be generalised" (Jupp, 2006, p. 271). The participants were given pseudonyms during the process of data analysis, which means that the names used in this report are not the participants' real names. This was done for the purpose of ensuring confidentiality.

### **3.5.3 Methods of Data Collection**

Rule and John (2011, p. 66) identify three categories of sources for data collection namely "people as sources; situations as sources and active participants as sources".



This study made use of an example from each category. From the category “people as sources”, this study used interviews. Next, from the category “situations as sources”, this study used observations. Finally, from the category “active participants as sources”, this study used drawings. The researcher also did a literature review to place the findings within a broader context.

### **3.5.3.1 Literature review**

Wellington (2015, p. 55) reminds us that before beginning a study it is important to find out “what is already known in our area of research, what’s been done before and, just as important, how it has been done”. A literature review “builds on the idea that knowledge accumulates and that we learn from and build on what others have done” (Neuman, 2011, p. 124). The literature on studies on identity development were reviewed with the purpose of learning from them what research has already been conducted in this field. This review of the literature also helped the researcher to locate the current study within this context.

Johnson and Christensen (2017, p. 87) state that the literature review “can be used to explain theoretical underpinnings of the research study, to assist in formulation of the research question and selection of the study population, or to stimulate new insights and concepts throughout the study”. As part of the literature review, the researcher also read Erik Erikson’s (1965, 1968 & 1971) work on the developmental stages. This theory of identity development informed the researcher’s choice of the participants’ age group for this study. Further reading on the methods that are used as interventions for academic underachievement also helped to inform how the researcher identified potential participants among the targeted age group.

The goals of a literature review as discussed by Neuman (2011, p. 124) are to “demonstrate familiarity with a body of knowledge and establish credibility; to show the path of prior research and how a current project is linked to it; to integrate and summarize what is known in an area and finally to learn from others and stimulate new ideas”. The literature review discussed in Chapter 2 achieved these goals, as it revealed the researcher’s knowledge of the research based on identity development and the school context as an environment influencing identity. In addition, the literature review also revealed that the researcher knew most of the major issues in this area of research. Furthermore, the literature review showed the development of knowledge

around the influence of social promotion and grade retention on behaviour and scholastic performance, which placed the current study in the context of identity development research. Finally, it connected this study to the existing knowledge about the experiences of those who underwent these forms of interventions and their effects on people in their later life stages.

### **3.5.3.2 Interviewing**

In qualitative research an interview is more of a conversation between the researcher and the participant. Yin (2014, p. 110) refers to it as “a guided conversation” as the researcher will have either an interview guide or an interview schedule. An interview guide is a “series of topics or broad interview questions which the researcher is to explore and probe with the interviewee” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 83). An interview schedule is a list of questions that the interviewer plans to ask the interviewee. “Participants should feel open and relaxed enough to give honest, truthful and reflective answers to the questions posed” (Dixon C.S, 2015,p. 2068). To conduct the qualitative interview, Rule and John (2011, p. 76) state that the researcher will need to have “interpersonal skills and communicative competence”.

This method was ideal for the study as it allowed for an in-depth discussion of thoughts and feelings. The researcher developed an interview guide before conducting the interviews. This ensured that all topics relevant to the study were covered in each interview. However, each interview was unique as the researcher probed the interviewee’s responses. Stake (1995, p. 102) advises that “an interviewer must listen more during the interview”. The researcher therefore recorded the interviews for translation and transcription after the interview. This allowed the researcher to be fully present and engaged during the interview.

### **3.5.3.3 Observation**

According to Maykut and Morehouse (2017, p. 68), “human phenomenon is best understood when studied in its context” and observations allow for such a study of phenomenon. Observation can be done in the following ways: through direct observation; where the researcher is an onlooker; or, through participant observation, where the “researcher becomes a participant in the activities where the context observations are taking place” (Rule & John, 2011, p. 80). As stated in Chapter One: “Participant observation reveals what people think and shows the cultural meanings

they use daily. It offers a chance to step outside our narrow cultural backgrounds, to set aside our socially inherited ethnocentrism, if only for a brief period, and to apprehend the world from the viewpoint of other human beings who live by different meaning systems” (Spradley, 1980, p. 128). For the purposes of this study, the researcher took on both direct observation and participant observation. Maykut and Morehouse (2017, p. 72) suggest that a “researcher takes part in the activities of the participants so he or she is less visible”. During data collection, the researcher used direct observations during the class observations. The researcher sat at the back of the classroom and made observations by following the observation guide prepared before these classroom observations. These observations were recorded as they were taking place. During the learner’s break time, the researcher became a participant observer, while assisting the kitchen staff who served lunch to the learners at the school. These observations were recorded immediately after the observation session had taken place. As stated by Stake (1995), observations help the researcher gain a substantial understanding of a case. These observations assisted the researcher in understanding the participants’ identity development in relation to the extent to which they were engaging in opportunities of exploration. Maykut and Morehouse (2017, p. 73) state that field notes should be a “record of what the researcher saw and heard without interpretation and should try as far as possible to capture the exact words that were spoken”. Recording of observations can either be “in the form of a checklist or in an open-ended format” (Rule & John, 2011, p. 82). This study made use of an open-ended format, where the researcher recorded what was considered significant according to the observation guide.

#### **3.5.3.4 Drawing activity**

Participatory methods have two purposes in a research study. They “increase the participants’ involvement” (Chambers, 2008, p. 169) and “control during data gathering” (Narayanasamy, 2009, p. 3) and they minimise literacy as a barrier” (Rule & John, 2011, p. 78). There are various types of participatory methods, namely, “transect walks, drawing, mapping and auto-photography” (Narayanasamy, 2009, p. 26). These methods are part of a participatory rural appraisal approach. The advantages of using participatory methods are the following they: create dialogue; value participants’ initiative and agency; develop skills among participants; shift power relations; introduce multiple modalities i.e. oral, written, visual, movement; participants

create and share knowledge and lastly promotes a sense of ownership (Chambers, 2008, p. 170; Rule & John, 2011, p. 104).

This study made use of drawings as a third source of data. Each participant was asked to draw a picture of an important event that took place in their community. In this drawing, the participants were asked to show the role they played as a member of this community. Once the drawing was completed the researcher and the participant discussed it. The researcher formulated a guide to ensure that during this discussion, the topics relevant to the study were discussed with each of the participants, yet the results of the discussion were unique to each participant. Then the participants were asked to make another drawing. The topic was of an event that they predicted would take place in ten years' time in their community. In this drawing, the participants had to show the role they might play in this event. After the drawing was complete, the researcher and the participant discussed it. The researcher had prepared a guide to ensure that topics relevant to the study were discussed during each of the participants' sessions.

Some of the advantages of using drawings as a data source in the study were that they provided an opportunity for the participants to express themselves creatively. This allowed the researcher to gain access to data that was not dependent on the participants' language skills. Rule and John (2011, p. 79) state that drawings allow participants to "express what is not easily put into words- ineffable, the elusive, not-yet-thought-through, subconscious".

Below is a table record of the data collected using the methods described above.

**Table 3.2: Table of data sources**

Name	AGE	GENDER	GRADE	Interview	Drawing activities	Observation
Zama	15	Female	9	2	2	2
Sipho	16	Male	9	2	2	2
Sibusisiwe	18	Female	10	2	2	2
Gabriel	17	Male	10	1	2	2
Nsizwa	18	Male	10	1	2	2
Princess	17	Female	10	1	2	2
Nozizwe	15	Female	9	1	2	2
Themba	15	Male	9	1	2	2
All the names are pseudonyms that were used for the purpose of ensuring confidentiality						

### **3.5.3.5 Recording of the data**

Interviews and the discussion of the drawing activity were recorded using a voice recorder. These recordings were then uploaded onto a password protected laptop, which belonged to the researcher. This ensured that nobody had access to the data besides the researcher. Observations were written down during the class observations and after the break-time observations. These written records were then typed and saved on the password protected laptop. The voice recordings from the interviews were also saved onto the laptop. Once the transcriptions and translations were done, then they too were saved onto the laptop.

### **3.5.4 Data analysis and interpretation**

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the study made use of an interpretivist paradigm as the aim was to understand and describe the experiences of learners who had not met the promotion requirements of their grade. With regards to data analysis the interpretivist paradigm assumes that “situations cannot be fractured into variables” (Thomas, 2011, p. 68). Therefore, the purpose of analysis is meaning making: “seeking to know how one part of the data relates to another” (Stake, 1995, p. 78). How the researcher makes meaning of the data collected is embedded in whether the data is interpreted or not

interpreted by the researcher. The purpose of the study will guide the researcher to either interpret or not interpret the data. “Some qualitative researchers will not interpret their data but opt to let the participants’ speak for themselves, whilst others will be more concerned with accurately describing the data collected ensuring it represents a reality that the participants will be able to recognise...The second type of qualitative researcher will engage in interpreting the data collected whereas the first type of qualitative researcher will not interpret the data collected” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p.128). In this study, the researcher purposed to describe the experiences of identity development for learners who did not meet the promotion requirements thus made use of data analysis methods that allowed for the interpretation of the data collected.

The process of analysis and interpretation allowed the researcher to “construct thick descriptions of the phenomenon; identify themes; generate explanations of thought and action evident in the case” (Rule & John, 2011, p. 90). The beginning stage of this analytical process was guided by the research questions with the researcher identifying patterns in the data that answered the research questions first. This was then followed by the identification of the patterns that unfolded from the data.

Recordings of the interviews and the drawing activity were transcribed and translated into English. The data was then stored on a password protected laptop. To keep a record of where in the process of analysis the researcher was with each of the cases, a table was used. The researcher would tick a column in the table once a step was completed for each of the cases. To analyse the data the researcher made use of coding and thematic analysis of the data. These strategies follow a method known as the “constant comparative method” (Makut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 134; Rule & John, 2011, p. 110; Stake, 1995, p. 136; Thomas, 2011, p. 90). The researcher went through the data more than once comparing each element of the data with others, thus identifying categories that the data could be grouped into for each of the participants. Before engaging in the process of identifying categories, the researcher had to prepare the data through coding. Coding is a process whereby the researcher labels sections of the data and identifies themes that come out from those sections (Maykut & Morehouse 1994; Rule & John, 2011; Thomas, 2011; Stake, 1995). The researcher made use of different colours to indicate themes in the data. This made it easy to identify sections of the data that related to the same theme. The original data was not

destroyed, as the researcher made copies of the data and worked on the copies in the process of coding. To begin coding the researcher identified the data relevant to the themes that were identified at the beginning stages of the study. Rule and John (2011, p. 156) refer to this as the “first iteration of the data”. In the “second iteration” (Rule & John, 2011, p. 157), the researcher looked for themes that unfolded from the data itself.

An analysis of the drawing activity began in the discussion of the drawing that took place after the drawing was completed. The researcher took care to ensure that the session was facilitated rather than directly analysing and interpreting the drawing. This ensured that the phenomenon was understood “through the eyes of the participants” (Rule & John, 2011, p.157).

### **3.5.5 Data Verification Strategies**

Through the process of exploring relationships and patterns across the data, the researcher could verify themes that immediately added value to the study and those that related significantly to each other. The occurrence of these themes throughout the various data collected verified the themes as significant to the outcomes of the study.

To increase the trustworthiness of the study the following strategies were used:

#### **3.5.5.1 Credibility**

The credibility of a study refers to “correspondence between the respondents’ perceived social constructs and the researcher’s portrayal of the constructs (Mertens, 2005, p.181). There are many strategies that a researcher can use to ensure credibility. This study made use of the following: member checks; peer debriefing; and, triangulation. Mertens (2005) recommends that as many strategies as is possible should be used.

In the use of member checks, the researcher verified the participants’ constructions with them at the end of interviews, namely, their drawing activities and observations made by the researcher. During the writing up process of the findings, the researcher engaged in peer debriefings with the supervisor and other peers whom the researcher worked closely with in discussion about this study. During the peer debriefings, the peers asked questions that helped the researcher to confront her own values and helped to guide the interpretation of the data.

Triangulation is the process in which the researcher “checks information that has been collected from different sources or methods for consistency of evidence across sources of data” (Rule & John, 2011, p. 162). In this study, the researcher made use multiple methods: semi-structured interviews; observations; and, a drawing activity. This also strengthened the validity of the findings of this study.

### ***3.5.5.2 Reflexivity/Confirmability***

The confirmability of a study is the assurance that the “findings and interpretations are not a figment of the researcher’s imagination” (Mertens, 1998, p. 184). By engaging in the process of peer debriefing, the researcher was able to access the objectivity of individuals who were not involved in the study, and through the questions that they posed.

### ***3.5.5.3 Dependability***

In this chapter, the researcher has engaged in a discussion of the research process as thoroughly as possible to ensure transparency. The researcher has also discussed the theoretical framework from which the cases were viewed in Chapter 2 of this document. The researcher’s explored positionalities were both as a researcher and as a previous staff member at the school. In discussing these roles, they were not seen to have had an impact on the data, because the learners, who were taught by the researcher while she was an educator at the school, were no longer in the targeted grades. While doing the data collection, the researcher realised two unforeseen positionalities. The first was that the researcher was at the school as a student from Stellenbosch University, which was an institution that was unknown to the participants’ caregivers. Secondly, the researcher arrived in a vehicle whose registration number was similar to those vehicles from the District’s DoE. This posed a challenge for the researcher, because some of the caregivers declined to give their consent for their children to participate in this study. This had an impact on the time it took to reach the total number of eight participants required for this study, as the researcher needed to renegotiate access in order to reach the target of eight participants for this study.

## **3.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Yin (2014) discusses criticisms of case studies that have been identified in the field of research over the years. Case studies have been seen as: “not rigorous enough”; there is a “lack of generalisability” (Yin; 2014, p. 218) and they “do not have a



comparative advantage” (Wellington; 2015, p. 44). By using a case study as its methodology, this research faced the same criticisms, because it used a small sample, which had eight participants. However, the purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding and description of the participants’ experiences. A generalisation of the findings to other learners who experience underachievement was not the aim. Though the sample is small, the unique experiences of the participants will enrich what is known about the role school plays in identity development in the specific case of learners who face academic challenges at school.

The participants in this study were also from a specific context, namely, that of a rural area. This context provided a unique experience regarding their access to information and exposure to varied opportunities that allowed them to explore the existential questions they might pose to themselves at this stage. The context of the participants is a reflection of the lived experiences of majority of South Africans i.e. dependency on government grants to sustain families, slow development in the area and high rates of unemployment. This makes the study unique as it gives a glance into the impact grade retention and social promotion are bringing to the journey to identity development of a significant number of learners within the nations education system.

### **3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

#### **3.7.1 Ethical Clearance**

Allan (2016, p. 95) highlights psychological principles of “beneficence” and “non-maleficence” that reflect a desire to do no harm. The process of ethical clearance was a helpful starting point in considering the research participants’ rights and ensuring that this study did not harm them. Feedback from the Research Ethics Committee of Human Research (REC) required certain modifications. The result ensured that ethical considerations aimed at protecting the participants were put in place before going into the field. Once this was done, the REC of Stellenbosch University granted permission to conduct this study.

#### **3.7.2 Informed Consent and assent**

Participants were recruited by the researcher in the field. Learners were informed about the study and requested to participate. Interested learners then went home to

inform their parents or guardians about the study. The researcher went to each of the parents or guardians personally to inform them of the study. This ensured that the researcher did the following: gave a fair explanation of the procedures to be followed in the data collection process; explained that a psychologist's services were available to the participants should they require counselling after the data collection; and, a reasonable explanation was given of the possible discomforts to the learners as a result of this study. An explanation of the study was done in IsiZulu, which is the language spoken in the area, and it is also the researcher's home language. The learners whose parents or guardians declined to give their consent for them to participate in the study were not included in the study. The parents or guardians who consented to their child's participation in the study signed a consent form. Those learners who agreed to participate in the study signed an assent form. The consent and assent forms were translated into IsiZulu, and this included the information leaflets that the parents/guardians and learners received. Both parents/guardians and learners were informed that they could withdraw their participation in the study at any time, and that none of the information shared with the researcher would be included in this report.

### **3.7.3 Confidentiality**

During the recruitment phase, the researcher spoke to possible participants personally. The learners were called to the school office using a method that the school usually made so that it did not draw unnecessary attention to those who spoke to the researcher.

### **3.7.4 Respect for the community**

In the field, the researcher encountered challenges with access and acceptance. Out of respect for the community, the researcher did not force any parents/guardians, who showed discomfort about their children participating in the study, to give their consent.

### **3.7.5 Respect for persons**

The researcher tried to ensure that all participants and their families were treated with respect during the process of recruitment and after participants were recruited. This respect was not only extended to those who participated in the study, but also those who chose not to participate in the study.

### **3.7.6 Anonymity**

Participants were informed that their names would not be mentioned in the thesis, but rather pseudonyms should be used. This ensured that any reference made to what was said by a specific individual would remain anonymous.

### **3.7.7 Privacy**

“Sensitivity of information refers to how personal or potentially threatening the information being collected is” (Cohen; Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 90). As the research topic was sensitive and to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity discussed during recruitment, the researcher was provided with an office space at the school, where the interviews and the drawing activity were conducted. The office was situated inside the reception area, which was secluded. This meant that it was not noticeable when the learners went to their interviews.

### **3.7.8 Costs/Benefits Ratio**

This is a fundamental ethical dilemma in social research. In this study there is no immediate, tangible benefit for the participant. Due to the participants being from a vulnerable group, the researcher had to put in place measures for their support should they need counselling after the interviews. A private psychologist who consented to providing counselling to participants was sought. The researcher was able to find a psychologist who agreed to help pro bono. However, an advantage of the interviews was that it enabled the participants to reflect on their current school performance and career goals. This might eventually lead them to an exploration-in-depth or exploration-in-breadth to discover other opportunities that might be available to them in the future.

### **3.7.9 Access and acceptance**

The researcher was granted permission to do the study at the school by both the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Department of Education and the school principal where the participants were recruited. However, the researcher did not anticipate having an outsider status with the community. The researcher had been an educator at the school for 5 years thus she did not make use of the school principal to reach the parents as she was not an unfamiliar face. This resulted in recruitment taking longer than expected, as parents/guardians declined consent on grounds of uncertainty of

the researcher's relations with the DoE. In addition, the parents/guardian were concerned that participation in the study would have implications on their children staying in a mainstream school. To help parents understand the study and why the researcher was conducting the research, the researcher explained the differences between an application and screening for entrance to a special school and the research process that she was in process of carrying out to parents. The researcher also explained that the study was part of her academic studies towards a masters degree.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter, the research question, paradigm, research design, research methodology, limitations of the study and ethical considerations were discussed. It also showed how the research question informed the paradigm selected, the research design as well as the research process. The research findings will be presented in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

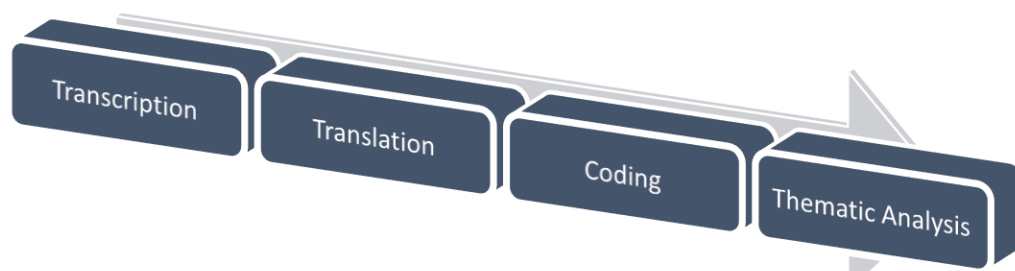
#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the findings of the study will be presented. Themes that emerged during thematic analysis of all the data will be discussed. The research question guided process of data collection and data analysis. The main research question “What are the experiences of the journey to identity development for underachieving learners?” and the following sub-questions “How does academic performance contribute to how the learners view themselves currently? What are their career aspirations? How do they feel about their community involvement?” guided this process.

Erik Erikson views identity as composing of three elements namely a “conscious sense of individual uniqueness; an unconscious striving for continuity of experience; and a solidarity with group ideals” (Erikson, as cited in Slee et al., 2012, p. 62). The researcher therefore used the sub-questions as a guide to explore these three elements in order to understand the participants’ journey to identity development.

#### 4.2 ANALYSIS PROCESS

“Analysis and interpretation allows the researcher to construct thick descriptions, identify themes, generate explanations of thought and action evident in the case and to theorise the case” (Rule & John, 2011, p. 160). Analysis is about making meaning and searching to find how one part relates to another. The researcher began the process of analysis by organising and preparing the data through transcribing and translating interviews and discussions about the participants’ drawings. Interviews were conducted in the participants’ mother tongue to enhance the quality of interviews and to ensure rich data. The process of data preparation was as follows:



**Figure 4.1.: Data analysis process**

The process of coding was done on the copies of translations and the observation notes. The researcher read through the translations twice. Firstly, to identify sections relating to categories identified by the researcher before starting data collection, and secondly, to identify new categories emerging from the data. During thematic analysis, the researcher searched for patterns of similarities and differences in the data.

**Table 4.1: Background of the research participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>GRADE</b>	<b>YEARS IN PHASE</b>	<b>GRADE RETAINED IN</b>	<b>GRADE SOCIALLY PROMOTED IN</b>
Zama	15	Female	9	3	none	6;8
Sipho	16	Male	9	03	4	2;8
Sibusisiwe	18	Female	10	02	9;10	9
Gabriel	17	Male	10	2	10	9
Nsizwa	18	Male	10	2	1; 3; 10	none
Princess	17	Female	10	2	10	none
Nozizwe	15	Female	9	3	none	8
Themba	15	Male	9	3	none	8

### 4.3 PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

In responding to the research question, the learners' experiences can be summarised in the following themes:

**Table 4.2: Categories and themes identified in data**

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>THEME</b>
Sense of self	Feelings of inferiority
	Preference for accepting external expectations of who individuals should be and how to carry themselves
Career aspirations	Unexplored career choices
	Career as a "redeeming feature" following school performance
Community Involvement	A way to fulfil recognition needs
School	School is of high importance in the lives of participants
	Completing school leads to a career

Following is a discussion of the themes.

### 4.3.1 Sense of self

As stated in Chapter 2 literature, the literature shows that the environment in which an individual grows has been found to shape their identity (Markovitch et al., 2017). According to Markovitch et al. (2017, p. 2093) “the increase in importance of the social context as adolescents negotiate their identity with regards to peers, parents and other role models suggests an increased role for environmental factors in identity development”.

#### 4.3.1.1 *Feelings of inferiority*

Signs of feeling inferior seem to appear in participants’ responses. However, these feelings are only present when speaking of matters relating to school. In a study by Frey (2005, p. 340) grade retention and social promotion were found to have an effect on “school self-concept, behaviour, competence, high school dropout and adult outcomes”. Participants in the study showed signs of a negative self-concept at school. Studies found that grade retention and social promotion have short-term positive effects on self-concept with negative effects lasting longer (Bonvin et al., 2008, p. 15; Klapproth et al., 2016, p.190; Lamote et al., 2014, p. 510). Some of the participants said the following:

“Njalo nje mina ngiyafeyila kodwa abanye baphase. Ngiyazama ukwenza umsebenzi wesikole kodwa ngijike ngifeyile khona kunjalo.”

[“I always fail and other learners pass. I try my best, do my work but still I fail.”] – Sibusisiwe;

“Kungenza ngisibone ngathi angihlakaniphanga mina ngoba abanye bayaziphasa lezifundo.”

[“I see myself as not being clever because the other learners in my class are able to pass these subjects but I can’t.”] –Zama;

“Akungiphathi kahle. Ngiyazama nami ukuphasa njengabanye engifunda nabo.”

[“My marks don’t make me feel good about myself. I try but I cannot get good marks like my other classmates.”] –Nsizwa;

“Ukuphinda u-grade 10 akungiphathanga kahle. Ngihlale nombuzo wokuthi yini kanti le e-wrong ngami?”

["Repeating grade 10 didn't make me feel good. I ask myself what is wrong with me all the time."] – Gabriel;

"Bengifisa nami ukujoyina lento yaka-fire ekade ingenelwe la esikoleni kodwa ngagcina ngingangenelanga...Kukhona izingane eziphasa kahle la esikoleni ngabona nje ukuthi akukho okungenziwa imina ngconongiyekele bona."

["I wanted to take part in our school's fire awareness campaign but I didn't...I felt there are other learners with better school marks who can represent the school."] – Princess.

#### ***4.3.1.2 Preference for accepting external expectations of who individuals should be and how to carry themselves***

A conscious sense of individual uniqueness is one of the elements of identity (Slee et al., 2012, p. 62). Among the participants, there was an inclination towards accepting external expectations of who they should be and how to conduct themselves. This was opposed to the use of individualistic characteristics that they felt made them unique. Participants adopted socially accepted identities of male and female as expected in their respective community.

"Njengendodana endala ekhaya kusemahlombe ami ukuthi ngibe isibonelo esihle kulaba abangilamayo. Kumele mina ngidlule kulokhu ubaba akwazi ukukwenza."

["As the eldest son, I have the responsibility to take care of my family and be a good role model to my younger siblings. Therefore, I have to do more than what my father did for our family whilst he was still alive."] - Themba;

"Kubalulekile ukuthi umuntu wesifazane azigcine ukuze umndeni wakhe uziqhenye ngaye uma eseqede isikole athole nomyeni. Nami bazoziqhenya ngami ekhaya ngelinye ilanga, ukuthi nje isikole sisanginika inking."

["It is important for a woman to keep herself pure so her family is proud of her when she finishes school and finds a husband. I am going to make my family proud of me one day, just that school is giving me a problem now."] – Nozizwe;



“Uyabahlonipha abantu abadala. U[REDACTED] ufunda u-grade 09 ngoba uke wahlangabezana nobunzima kodwa manje sekushintshile. Ubunzima bumfundise kakhulu ngenhlonipho”

[“He respects elders. S[REDACTED] is in grade 09 because in primary school he had a difficult time but now has changed. It taught him a lot about respect.”] – Sipho;

Interviewer: Ngibone ukuthi ugobisa ikhanda uma ukhuluma nothisha bakho. Ngabe sikhona isizathu sokuthi wenze lokho?

Interviewee: Umama wami wangitshela ukuthi kukhombisa inhlonipho ukungambuki emehlweni umuntu omdala umaekhuluma nawe

[Interviewer: I noticed that when speaking to your teachers and I you look down. Why do you do that?

Interviewee: My mother told me that it is a sign of respect to not look your elders in the eyes when talking to them.] -Themba

### **4.3.2 Career aspirations**

Setting career goals also reveals an individual's values and ideals in answering the question, 'What do I wish to achieve?' According to Louw (1992, p. 53), “[v]alues and ideals” form the second component to identity. Career aspirations are an expression of “striving for continuity of experience”, which is one of the three elements of identity identified by Erikson (Louw, 1992, p. 53). When making a career choice, one considers interests, skills, talents and aptitude.

#### ***4.3.2.1 School performance opens up possibility of going into careers that hold no meaning for participants***

School performance does not stop participants from aspiring to a career. However, participants were aware that their school performance will present a challenge to them pursuing their dream careers. “Those who complete high school are less likely to enter economic and social advantages of a bachelor's degree namely higher earnings and lower rates of unemployment” (Fine & Davis, 2003, p. 406). The careers they have decided to follow are based on their current academic achievement, the possibility of not achieving marks good enough for entry into a course in tertiary education or not

passing the grade 12 final examinations. Participants are concerned about whether they would get a job to provide for their families. There is no mention of possible income in the jobs they discuss.

“Ngifisa ukuba i-social worker” ... “Ngifuna ukusiza abantu abazithola beswele bethwele kanzima njengoba bekwenzeka kimina” ... “Akuthembisi. Angazi ngizofinyelela kanjani kuleli phupho lami ngaphandle kwalezifundi ezingithwalisa kanzima.”

[“I would like to be a social worker ... I want to help people to not find themselves in situations where they are helpless and struggling like I did. ... It does not look promising. I don’t see how I will ever achieve my goals without these subjects that I struggle with.”

- Princess;

“(Uthule) Ngingasho ngithi amaphupho ami nendlela engenza ngayo esikoleni akuhambisani. Amamaki ami ayehla nje angazi kwenziwa yini.” - Sibusisiwe

[“(Silence) I could say my dreams and my performance at school do not go together. My marks are getting worse and I do not understand why.”] - Sibusisiwe;

“Ngifisa ukwenza i-law noma i-social work...Ukngenzi kahle ezifundweni zami kuphazamisa amaphupho ami.”

[“I hope to either study law or social work...Not doing well in my subjects isn’t a good thing for my dreams.”] - Gabriel;

“Uma kungenzeka ngifisa ukuba udokotela ...Ngiyakuthanda ukuba idokotela ngoba kuzokhombisa ukuthi nami ikhona into engikwazi ukuyenza futhi ngizobe ngisiza abantu abagulayo.”

[“If possible I would like to be a doctor...I like being a doctor because it will prove that there is something I can do too and I will be helping the sick.”] – Sipho.

Acknowledging that their school performance will have a negative impact on their career goals, the participants then choose an alternative career that they do not necessarily like, but that they feel they will stand a better chance of meeting the requirements to enter these careers. This is shown by the following quotations from the participants:

“Iphupho lami selonakele. Bengifisa ukuba u-nurse kodwa ngafeyila i-maths. Lokho kwaphoqa ukuthi ngenze i-mathslit manje angisakwazi ukuyofundela ubu-nurse. Ngithembe ukuthi ngizokwazi ukungena emaphoyiseni.”

[“My dream has been ruined. I wanted to be a nurse but failed maths. So I had to take MathsLit and I can’t go into nursing anymore. I hope I can make it into being a police officer.”] – Themba;

“Uma ngingawuqedi grade 12 ngizoya edolobheni ngiyofuna umsebenzi.”

[“If I don’t finish grade 12 then I will go find a job in town.”] – Nozizwe;

“Uma ngingawuqedi u-grade 12 ngeke ngikwazi ukuqhubeka nezifundo zami. Kungaba into embi ngempela. Ngeke ngikwazi ukuba nemali yezinto engifuna ukuba nazo... Mhlampe ngingafuna umsebenzi wokuklina emizini yabantu”

[“If I don’t finish grade 12, I will not be able to study further then I won’t be able to find a job. It would be really bad. I won’t have money to do the things I want to do ... Maybe I can find work cleaning people’s homes or looking after their kids.”] – Zama;

“Uma enganyuki amamaki ami ngizofuna umsebenzi wokuba iphoyisa lomgwaqo.”

[“If my marks do not improve then I will look for a job as traffic officer since I won’t be able to study in tertiary.”] – Nsizwa.

#### **4.3.2.2 Career as a “redeeming feature” following school performance**

Their school performance led to the participants allowing external expectations from their families and community at large to influence the careers that they were currently considering. Participants have internalised these external expectations to motivate them in terms of their career aspirations. Their choice of a career is no longer an expression of their individuality, as their personal interests, skills or talents were not considered. Participants were considering careers that they believed would assist them in fulfilling the external expectations they have internalised.

“Kumele nami ngibasize osisi baminukufeza izidingo zalo mndeni.”

[“I need to also help my sisters in providing for the family’s needs.”] – Princess;

“Njengendodana endala kumele ngibe isiboneleo esihle kulaba abangilamayo ngisize umama ukubakhulisa. Ubaba ongizalayo sewashona. Imina manje okumele anakekele umama nezingane zakithi.”

[“As the eldest son, I have to be a good example to my younger siblings and help my mother raise them. My father passed away. I must now take care of my mom and siblings.”] – Nsizwa;

“Laba engibalamayo abawuphasanga u-grade 12. Kunzima kubona ukuthola imisebenzi. Baphuthelwe nayithuba lokufunda ikhompiyutha njengoba bengenawo u-matric. Angifisi ukuthi lokho kwenzeke nakimina. Ngifuna ukuba owowkuqala ekhaya ukuqeda u-12 ukuze umndeni wamiuziqhenye ngami.”

[“My older siblings did not pass grade 12. They are now struggling to find jobs. They even missed an opportunity to do a computer course because they do not have their matric certificates. I don’t want that to happen to me. I want to be the first to pass grade 12 in my family and make my family proud.”] – Sipho.

#### **4.3.3 Community involvement fulfils recognition needs**

Erikson (1965, p. 233) defines a “sense of industry” as a “sense of being useful, a sense of being able to make things and make them well even perfectly”. During the stage “industry versus inferiority”, which is the stage before “identity versus role confusion”, “the child learns to win recognition by being able to do things” (Erikson, 1965, p. 233.). He adds that “[s]uccess in school builds a sense of industry whereas failing in school builds a sense of inadequacy and inferiority” (Erikson, 1965, p. 233). As mentioned in section 4.3.1.1, the participants in this study showed signs of a sense of inferiority regarding school related situations, for example, in their school work and their participation in school activities. However, there were signs of confidence evident in participants’ responses pertaining to their involvement with their communities. Having internalised the external expectations of who they should be and how they should carry themselves, the participants expressed their perceived ability to succeed in community activities. Participants indicated receiving support and positive regard in their community, which gave them confidence in being involved with community related projects. Within their community, the participants felt a “sense of industry” (Erikson, 1965, p. 233).

“Ikhangela lethu umuntu esikwaziyo ukuxoxa naye futhi unikezana iziyalo ezinhle.”

[“Our ward councillor is someone we are able to speak to and he gives good advice and guidance.”] – Themba;

“Abanye omakhelwane bami sebengaze isikhathi eside bayazi ukuthi ngiwumuntu onjani.”

[“Some of my neighbours have known me for a long time and know the kind of person that I am.”] – Nozizwe

“Umpakathi wangakithi uyakwazi ukusizana. Abantu abadala bahlezi besikhuthaza.”

[“The community is very supportive. The elders always encourage us.”] – Princess

#### **4.3.4 School**

##### ***4.3.4.1 School is of high importance in the participants' lives***

Studies have found that grade retention and social promotion have no negative effect on motivation to complete high school and to pursue a tertiary education, although the actual chances of pursuing a post school qualification are lessened (Fine & Davis, 2003). Martin (2009, p.110) found that there was a “higher value” in school and “higher positive intentions” among learners who had been retained and/or promoted.

Even though there were signs that identified the participants' feelings of inferiority when referring to school, they still placed great value on school. The ability to get an education is an important part of their success and it had a positive effect on their identity development.

“Imfundo ibalulekile. Ngaphandle kwayo awubi nalutho. Ngidinga ukufubdaukuze ngibe nekusasa eliqhakazile.”

[“Education is important. Without it you will not have anything in this life. I need to get an education so I can have a bright future.”] – Gabriel;

“Isikole gingasichaza ngithi si-right kwezinye izikhathi (clears throat) uhlangana nabanye abafundi obungabazi nothisha nabo bayakwazi ukuxoxisana nawe ngezinkinga obhekene nazo ekhaya.”

["I would describe school as okay because at times (clears throat) you meet other learners that you did not know and sometimes teachers are able to talk to you about issues you could not speak up about at home."] – Zama;

"Isikole sibenzima kimina kodwa ubunzima negihlangabezane nabo bungenze ngibone ukuthi yini engiyifunayo empilweni bese ngisebenze kanzima ukuthi ngiyithole. Ngiyathemba ukuthi ngizokwazi ukuthi ngibe nento engiyenzayo nami ngibe umuntu ngelinye ilanga uma ngisebenza kanzima."

["School has been hard for me, but my challenges have made me realise what I want in life and work towards it. I have faith that I will be able to do something and be someone one day if I work hard."] – Nsizwa;

"Ukuba sesikoleni ngikubona kuwusizo kakhulu. Ukuza esikoleni kuyangisiza ukubhekane nezimo zasekhaya."

["I find being in school very helpful. Coming to school helps me cope with the circumstances at home."] – Sibusisiwe.

#### **4.3.4.2 Completing school leads to a career**

In the participants' view, the lack of a formal education will have a negative impact on their finding good employment and, ultimately, on the lives of their families. This makes the participants persevere and not aim to drop out of school. This is not a finding unique to participants of the study only. This finding is also shown in other research: "In the South African schooling environment of high grade retention and low school completion, there are surprisingly few learners who report poor grades as reason for dropping out" (Branson et al., 2013, p. 12).

"Ukungawuqedi u-grade 12 kungaba into embi. Ukuthi ubaba wami ubewumculi akusho ukuthi nami kumele ngibe uyena. Mina kumele ngenze okukhulu kunalokhu akwenzile yena."

["Not completing grade 12 would be a bad thing. Just because my father sings doesn't mean I too must sing. I have to do something greater."] – Sipho;

"Uma ngingawuphasi u-grade 12 ngizobe ngibaphoxile abazali bami. Amthemba abo asekimina ukuthi impilo ibengcono ekhaya."

["If I do not pass grade12 I will have failed my parents. As they are looking to me for a better life for the family."] – Nozizwe;

"Kungabukisa ngami kakhulu. Wonke umuntu oyile esikoleni uwuphasile u-grade 12 ngasekhaya. Ngabe kuqala ngami ukufeyila u-grade 12."

["It would embarrass me so much. Everyone who has gone to school in my neighbourhood has passed matric. I would be the first person to not pass matric."] – Princess;

"Ngeke afezeke amaphupho. Ngathanda ukubhala exam futhi."

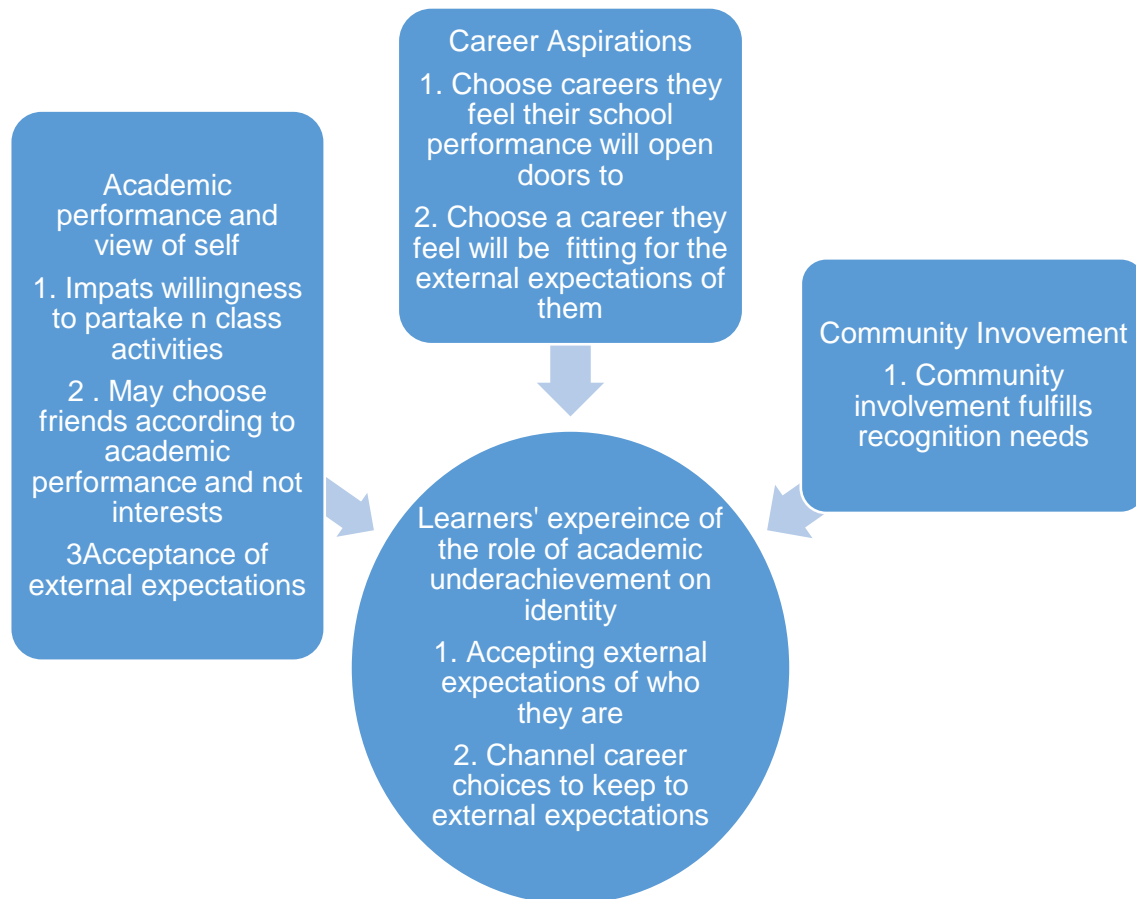
["I would not be able to reach my dreams. I would like to rewrite the final exams."]

– Gabriel;

"Kungangiphatha kabi kodwa ngeke ngililahle ithemba ngoba uyakwazi ukubhala i-exam okwesibili."

["I would be sad but I won't lose hope, because there's the possibility of rewriting exams."]

- Zama.



**Figure 4.2: Summary of participants' responses**

#### 4.4 INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

As mentioned in Chapter 1, studies conducted on adults with learning difficulties showed that those who experienced learning difficulties at school are worthy of being considered as research subjects. Adults with learning difficulties reported that negative childhood experiences influenced their adult life too, for example, if they were embarrassed by a teacher in class, then this led to some of them struggling with social relationships as adults. The results of being humiliated in public at school led to



feelings of being different as adults (Gibson & Kendall, 2010, p. 192; Nalavany et al., 2011, p. 64). This study aimed to explore the journey to identity development as experienced by learners who did not meet the promotion requirements at school. Even though these learners were not diagnosed with any learning difficulty, they too had had negative experiences at school. Thus there were similarities between them and the adults with learning difficulties. Due to not meeting the minimum promotion requirements for their respective grades, these learners were either retained or socially promoted. The researcher's interest was on the effects of this confirmation of their inability to cope with school work on their identity development.

In understanding the identity development of the participants, the researcher used Erik Erikson's (1965, p. 231) "stages of psychosocial development". The participants in this study were all in their teenage years. According to Erikson's (1965, p. 231) "stages of psychosocial development", the participants were at the beginning of negotiating the "identity versus role confusion" stage. In this stage, the individual seeks to "consolidate their social roles" (Erikson, 1971, p. 108). In addition, Erikson (1965, p. 235) stated that the "individual becomes pre-occupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are and question of how to connect the earlier cultivated roles and skills with the ideal prototype". Participants in this study showed to be aware of their social roles. However, they were more preoccupied with becoming what others see them as. This is not in line with trying to find a balance between external perspectives and internal perspectives of the self as stated by the theory.

The sample of participants who took part in the study showed that the previous stage, "industry versus inferiority" (Erikson, 1965, p. 234), had not been resolved. Their current school performance evoked a "sense of inadequacy and inferiority", which was shown specifically regarding the participants' school activities. According to Erikson (1968, p. 178), when this stage is not integrated, then the learner who struggles academically "may face years of not enjoying work thus impacting on healthy personality building"; the learner also "learns to emphasise outside hindrances and develops their first sense of division of equality of opportunity". However, the participants expressed the hope that they might succeed at the end of grade 12. It was this hope that kept them at school. According to Erikson (as cited in Louw et al., 1992, p. 53), "the opportunity to achieve success is an important part of education since it

helps the child avoid feelings of inferiority". It appeared that for the participants, the final rating of whether school was successful or not would be their final results in grade 12. This hope of still having a chance to do better, so that the participants fulfilled the family or society's external expectations, enabled them not to drop out of school, even though they showed signs of a "sense of inadequacy and inferiority" (Erikson, 1965, p. 232).

In the "identity versus role confusion" stage, an individual questions what was learnt in the previous stages regardless of whether this stage was resolved positively or negatively. As they were preoccupied with how they appeared to be in the eyes of others, the participants did not seem to question their family or their community's external expectations. Instead, the participants internalised these expectations. The participants' career aspirations and their community involvement appeared to be opportunities to fulfil the internalisation of external expectations and not an exploration of their individual characteristics. According to the findings of this study, the "industry versus inferiority" stage was still dominant in these participants, and they did not question what they had learnt in previous stages, as was expected in the "identity versus role confusion" stage (Erikson, 1965, pp. 234-235). Slee (2012, p. 62) states that "how we meet and cope with each crisis depends in part on how we have dealt with the crises that we encountered in the previous stage/s of development". The participants realised that they were no longer children and must be prepared to take their place in the world as adults. As a result, they needed to pick a career, and become active members of society in order to deal with challenges. However, this specific responsibility was shadowed by a "sense of inadequacy and inferiority" (Erikson, 1965, p. 234). This was shown by the participants' adoption of external expectations as to who they ought to be as young men and women and how they ought to carry themselves. "What is expected of the adolescent is a complete ego, [which is a] balance between the extremes of the id and superego" (Erikson, 1971, p. 179). With the internalisation of external expectations, the participants were developing their identity in the context of community relationships. According to the four identity statuses that were suggested by Marcia (1967, p. 119), the participants were showing signs of "Identity Foreclosure", because they embraced learnt identities from their social context. In other words, the participants did not explore these identities before they committed to them. This brings question of the participants'

commitment to these identities over time seeing that participants have made important life decisions based on these identities, such as choosing a career. However, as previously stated in Chapter 2, the lack of consideration of the social context was one of the major criticisms of Marcia's "Identity Status Model" (1967, p. 119). Although Marcia's model was based on Erik Erikson's developmental stages, he emphasised that identity was developed within transactions that take place between the individual and their social context. Marcia's model is thus not fully aligned to the views of Erikson though still relevant in critically discussing the findings of this study. The participants' school performance was not sustaining the promise of Erikson's earlier stage, that is, a sense of unbroken initiative (Erikson, 1965, p.233). Instead, the participants' school performance has had the result of developing a sense of inadequacy and inferiority within them. This sense of inadequacy and inferiority has led participants to internalising external expectations of who and what they should be overlooking their own views of themselves. Participants' decision to internalise external expectations opposed to active exploration of their identity has the potential of leading to developing an unhealthy personality due to the lack of balance between individual and social context.

#### **4.5 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Shaffer (1999, p. 45) stated that Erikson's theory of development emphasised the importance of socio-cultural determinants. Therefore, it is important to consider the socio-cultural aspects of the participants' environment when making or considering recommendations. Yet, it is within these aspects that their reality was embedded and within these aspects that a healthy psychological adjustment had to take place. A healthy personality is "a personality that has weathered inner and outer conflicts with an increased sense of inner unity, an increase in good judgement and an increase in the capacity to do well" (Erikson, 1971, p. 179). Thus, a balance between the individual and the social context is found when there is a resolution of the "identity versus role confusion" stage (Erikson, 1971, p. 180).

This study was conducted in a community situated in a rural area, where the closest clinic and police station are out of reach by foot. The majority of the families in this area were dependent on government support. Some of the participants stated that if

they completed grade 12, then they would be the first in their families to have a matric certificate. Gender-based roles and responsibilities are still strongly embedded in the community, which values a traditional way of living more than a Westernised way of living.

Erikson (1965, p. 235) states that in resolving the stage “identity versus role confusion”, it is important for the child to learn that their way of mastering an experience is different to that of others. The participants in this study would benefit a great deal if they were involved in a programme that could help them in the following ways: to build a sense of industry; to understand their strengths and weaknesses; and, how to use the knowledge learnt at school in their everyday lives. In this programme, the participants could lay the foundation of building a conscious sense of their individual uniqueness and how this would contribute to their families and the community. By discovering their individual uniqueness, the researcher hopes that this might spark a desire in the participants to learn continuously, so that they would not shy away from opportunities to develop themselves. The participants did not participate in co-curricular activities, that they feel those who do well in school are best suited to participate in these activities. Once exposed to identity exploration, participants would benefit a great deal in learn skills on how to balance their individual uniqueness and the social context in which they live. Balancing their families’ and community’s expectations of them and their individual perspectives of who they are. Erikson states that each crisis is present throughout the lifespan but one dominates at a specific time. This programme would thus instil a skill participants can use throughout their lifespan.

#### **4.6 REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Case studies are criticised for their lack of generalisability and not having the advantages of comparisons. These criticisms are also relevant to the current study. However, the findings of the study bring to light important matters whose impact is a nationwide concern in South Africa. Learners in another rural community, or in a developing semi-rural area or in urban areas, who have been retained or socially promoted, might not necessarily share the same experiences as the participants in this study. Also, the study made use of a small sample which decreased the study’s generalisability. However, these findings show that there is a need to explore the impact of grade retention and social promotion on identity development.

This interpretive study has shared the experiences, which are specific to the participants and their environment. It has embarked on understanding the impact of interventions that are accepted as standard practice within the NDE on the lived experiences of the individual learners. This study highlights a meeting point of policy in document form and the lived experiences of those whom policy is implemented. These intervention practices are implemented with the aim to improve academic achievement amongst learners. The practices are directed to the outcomes of teaching and learning, which is the main purpose of the school environment. This study has highlighted a role played by education that is beyond teaching and learning in the classroom and how interventions within education can impact personal development. Lastly this study has highlighted the value of education to the participants' overall development as a person.

The researcher was able to have two rounds of data collection. In the first round of data collection the researcher did not have as much time available as during the second round. The differences in time for collection of data had an impact on the depth of data collected. In the second round, the researcher was able to recall participants from the first round and to discuss in-depth themes that came up during her analysis of the data. As a result of their previous experience, the participants were more relaxed during the second round of data collection and data collected was more in-depth.

Future research can consider ways of making the findings of this study more generalisable. This could help inform policy in education in order to ensure that the education system does not have a negative effect on psychosocial development. Children start school at an earlier age now, which means that many of the stages of Erikson's psychosocial theory of development take place at school and not in the home. A school system that acknowledges these psychosocial needs would benefit society. School leavers would be equipped with skills they can use throughout their lifespan as they navigate the changes we see taking place daily. For example, in the field of careers people do not remain in the same career throughout their lifespan. Economic changes amongst other influences require an individual to be able to evaluate their capabilities and need for upskilling constantly. Future researchers should also consider having more time to engage with the participants, because the topics discussed during the first round of data collection led to the participants reflecting in greater depth during the second round of data collection. If there is more

than one contact session with the participants, then this would allow for more in-depth data to be collected.

#### **4.7 CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

The overall findings of the study agree with studies by Gibson and Kendall (2010) and Nalavany et al. (2011). They stated that learners who experienced learning difficulties at school were a topic worthy of additional research, as their studies revealed that negative childhood experiences influenced adulthood. While these findings cannot be generalised to all learners who have been retained in a grade or socially promoted, they indicate that there is a need to evaluate the short and long-term effects of these practices on identity development.

This study did not seek to apply negative labels to the learners. Instead, it aimed to encourage all stakeholders in education to be aware of the role education plays in the lives of learners, that goes beyond the transfer of knowledge and skills from an educator to a learner in the classroom. The findings of the study and literature consulted reveal that school is a context that is as important as the home and the community. It is common practice to place psychosocial development in the family and community only however this study has shown how the participants' identity development is being impacted by their experiences in school. This places a need for the school environment to be broaden its duties beyond teaching and learning. As the individual is developing, their experiences within the school environment are impacting the course of their development. This study has also made the researcher reflect on policy and reality of policy implementation with a focus on individual experiences of policy implementation. How are differences in context to be taken into consideration when implementing policy? As previously stated, learners in another environment may have different experiences of retention and social promotion to those of the participants of this study.

## REFERENCES

- Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools, Notice NO. 2432 of 1998, GG 19377 (19 October 1998)
- Allan, A (2016) Law and ethics in psychology: An international perspective 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed Inter-Ed
- An, J (2015) Micro-study Reveals Flaws in Pedagogy: A Study of Social Promotion in Tianjin China. *International Education* 44(2)23-40
- Berlot, M & Vandenberghe, V (2014) Evaluating the 'threat' effects of grade repetition: exploiting the 2001 reform by the French-speaking community of Belgium. *Education Economics* 22 (01), 73-89
- Beyer, W & Luyckx, K. (2016) Ruminative Exploration and Reconsideration of Commitment as Risk Factors for Suboptimal Identity Development in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood. *Journal of Adolescence* 47 169-178
- Branson, N; Hofmeyr, C & Lam, D (2013) Progress through school and the determinants of school dropout in South Africa. A Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit Working Paper Number 100. Cape Town: SALDRU, University of Cape Town
- Bonvin, P; Bless, P & Schuepbach, M (2008) Grade Retention: decision-making and effects on learning as well as social and emotional development. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 19(1) 1-19
- Bosman, L.J (2005) Grade Retention: Is It a Help or Hindrance to Student Academic Success. *Preventing School Failure* 49(3) 42-46
- Chambers, R (2008) *Revolutions in Development Inquiry* EarthScan
- Chandler, A.C., & Sowell, V. (1980). The Relationship of Academic Achievement and Self-Concept in Learning Disabled Students. *American Secondary Education*, 10(4), 18-23
- Chom, H; Hughes, J.N; West, S.G & Im, M.H (2016) Effect of retention in elementary grades on grade 09 motivation for educational attainment. *Journal of School Psychology* 53 7-24



Cohen, L; Manion, L & Morrison, K (2011) *research Methods in Education* 7th Ed  
Routledge Taylor and Francis Group

Demanet, J & Van Houtte, M (2013) Grade Retention and its association with school misconduct in adolescence: a multilevel approach. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 24(4) 417-434

Demanet, J & Van Houtte, M (2016) Are Flunkers Social Outcasts? A Multilevel Study of Grade Retention Effects on Same-Grade Friendships. *American Educational Research Journal* 53(3) 745-780

Dixon, C.S (2015) Interviewing Adolescent Females in Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report* 20(12), 2067-2077

Durrant, J.E., Cunningham, C.E., & Voelker, S. (1990). Academic, Social and General Self-Concepts of Behavioral Subgroups of Learning Disabled Children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82(4), 657-663

Erikson, E.H (1965) *Childhood and Society*. Vintage Books London

Erikson, E.H (1968) *Identity and the Life Cycle*. WW Norton & Company

Erikson, E. (1971) *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton

Faircloth, B.S (2009) Making the Most of Adolescence: Harnessing the Search for Identity to Understand Classroom Belonging. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 24(3) 321-348

Faircloth, B.S (2012) Wearing a Mask vs Connecting Identity with Learning. *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 37 186-194

Fine, J.G & Davis, J.M (2003) Grade retention and enrolment in post-secondary education. *Journal of School Psychology* 41 401-411

Flum, A & Kaplan H. (2012) Identity Formation in Educational Settings: a contextualised view of theory and research in practice. *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 37 240-245

Frey, N (2005) Retention, Social Promotion and Academic Redshirting: What Do We Know? *Remedial and Special Education* 26(6) 332-344



Gibson, S and Kendall, L. (2010). Stories from school: dyslexia learners' voices on factors impacting on achievement. *British Journal of Learning Support* 25(4)187-193

Giles, D.C (2002) *Advanced Research Methods in Psychology*. Routledge

*Guidelines for Inclusive Teaching and Learning*, Department of Education (2010)

Im, M.H.; Hughes, J.N.; Kwok, O.; Puckett, S. & Cerda, C.A. (2013). Effect of retention in elementary grades on transition to middle school. *Journal of School Psychology*, 51 349-365

Jeznik, K (2015). From Acknowledgment to the Recognition of Children's and Adolescents' Identity. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies* 1 28-45

Jimerson, S.R & Ferguson, P (2007) A Longitudinal Study of Grade Retention: Academic and Behavioral Outcomes of Retained Students Through Adolescence. *School Psychology Quarterly* 22(3) 314-339

Jimerson, S.R; Pletcher, AS.M.W; Graydo, K; Schnurr, B.L; Nickerson, A.B & Kunudert, D.K (2006) Beyond Grade Retention and Social Promotion: Promoting the Social and Academic Competence of Students" *Psychology in the Schools* 43(1) 85-96

Jing, A. (2015) Micro-Study Reveals flaws in Pedagogy: A Study of Social Promotion in Tianjin, China. *International Education*. 44 (2) 23-40

Johnson,B.R & Christensen,L (2017) *Educational Research: quantitative, qualitative and mixed approaches* 5th Ed SAGE

Johnsen, K.P., & Medle, M.L. (1978). Academic Self-Concept Among Black High School Seniors: An examination of perceived agreement with selected others. *Phylon*, 39(3), 264-274

Jupp, V (2006) *The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods*. SAGE Publications

Kaplan, A & Flum, H. (2009) Motivation and Identity: The Relations of Action and Development in Educational Contexts – An Introduction to the Special Issue. *Educational Psychologist* 44(2) 73-77

Klapproth, F; Scholtz, P; Brunner, M; Keller, U; Fischbach, A; Ugen, S & Martin, R (2016) Short-term and medium-term effects of grade retention in secondary school on academic achievement and psychosocial outcome variables. *Learning and Individual Differences* 50 182-194

Kozleski, E.B (2017) The Uses of Qualitative Research: Powerful methods to inform evidence-based practice in education. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* 42(1) 19-32

Lamote, C; Pinxten, M; Van Den Noortgate, W & Van Damme, J (2014) Is the cure worse than the disease? A Longitudinal study on the effect of grade retention in secondary education on achievement and academic self-concept. *Educational Studies* 40(5) 496-514

Louw, D.A, van Ede, D.M & Louw, A.E (1999) *Human Development*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed Kagiso Publishers

Luyckx, K & Robitschek, C (2014) Personal Growth Initiative and Identity Formation in Adolescence through Young Adulthood: Mediating processes on the pathway to wellbeing. *Journal of Adolescence* 37(7) 973-981

Lynch, M. (2013). Alternatives to Social Promotion and Retention. *Interchange* 44 pp291-309

Marcia, J. (1980). Identity in Adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed). *Handbook in Adolescent Psychology* (pp159-187). New York: Wiley

Maree, K (2013) *First Steps in Research* 2nd Ed Van Schaik

Markovitch, N; Luyckx, K; Klimstra, T; Abramson, L & Knafo-Noam, A. (2017). Identity Exploration and Commitment in Early Adolescence: Genetic and Environmental Contributions. *Developmental Psychology* 53 (11) 2092-2102

Martin, A.J (2009) Age Appropriateness and Motivation, Engagement and Performance in High School: Effects of Age Within Cohort, Grade Retention and Delayed School Entry. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 10 (1) 101-114

Maykut, P & Morehouse, R (1994) *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophical and Practical Guide*. Routledge Falmer

Meca, A; Schwartz,S.J; Ritchie, R.A; Benitez, C.G; Beyers, W; Picariello,S;  
Zamboanga, L.B; Hardy, S.A; Luyckx, K; Kim, S.Y; Whitbourne, S.K; Crocettie, E &  
Brown, E.J.(2015) Identity Centrality and Psychosocial functioning: A Person-  
Centered Approach. *Emerging Adulthood* 3(5) 327-339

Mertens, D.M, (1998). *Research Methods in Education and Psychology: integrating diversity with quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Sage Publications

Mertens, D.M (2005) *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating diversity with Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Methods*. 3rd Ed  
SAGE Publications Inc

McCoy, A.R & Reynolds, A.J (1999) Grade Retentionand School Performance: An  
Extended Investigation. *Journal of School Psychology* 37(3) 273-298

Nalavany. B.A, Carawan.L.W and Rennick.R.A. (2011) Psychosocial Experiences  
Associated With Confirmed and Self-identified Dyslexia: A Participant Driven  
Concept Map of Adult Perspective. *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 44(1)63-79

Narayanasamy,N (2009) *Participatory Rural Appraisal: principles, methods and application* SAGE

National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training, Department of  
Education (1997)

National Education Policy Act, 1996 (Act NO.27 of 1996)

National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the  
National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12, Department of Education (2011)

National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the  
National Curriculum Statement Grade R-12, National Department of Education  
(2017)

Negru-Subtirica, O; Pop, E.I; Luyckx, K; Dezutter, J & Steger, M.F. (2016) The  
Meaningful identity: A longitudinal Look at the Interplay between Identity and  
Meaning in Life in Adolescence. *Developmental Psychology* 52(11) 1926-1936

Neuman,W.L (2011) *Social Research Methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches* 7th Ed Pearson

Pather.S and Remenyi.D(2004). Some of the Philosophical Issues Underpinning Research in Information Systems: From Positivism to Realism. Proceedings from SAICSIT 2004.141-146

Peixoto,F., & Almeida, L.S,(2010). Self-Concept, Self-esteem and Academic Achievement: strategies for maintaining self-esteem in students experiencing academic failure. Journal of Psychology of Education,25(2), 157-175

Reschly, A.L. & Christenson, S.L. (2013). Grade retention: Historical perspectives and new research. Journal of School Psychology, 51 319-322

Rule, P & John, V (2011) Your Guide to Case Study Research. Van Schaik Publishers

Schwartz, S.J; Zamboanga, B.L; Luyckx, K; Meca, A & Ritchie, R.A. (2013). Identity in Emerging Adulthood: Reviewing the field and looking forward. Emerging Adulthood 1(2) 96-113

Shaffer, D.R (1999) Developmental Psychology: Childhood and Adolescence. 5<sup>th</sup> Ed Brooks/Cole Publishing Company

Slee, P.T; Cambridge, M & Spears, B (2012). Child, Adolescent and Family Development 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed Cambridge University Press

Spradley, J.P. (1980). Participant Observation. Holt, Rinehart and Winston

Stake, R.E (1995) The Art of Case Study Research. SAGE Publications

Sturdevent, M.S., & Spear, B.A., (2002). Adolescent Psychosocial Development. Journal of the American Dietetic Association, p.S30-S31

Swanborn, P. (2010) Case Study Research: what, why and how? SAGE

Terre Blanche, M; Durrheim, K & Painter, D (2006) Research in Practice: applied methods for the social sciences. UCT Press

Thom, D.P., & Coetzee, C.H, (2004). Identity Development of South African Adolescents in a Democratic Society. Society in Transition, 35(1), 183-193

Thomas, P. (2010). Research methodology and design. Research methodology and design, 291-334.

Tingle, L.R., Schoeneberger, J. & Algobozzine, B (2012). Does Grade Retention Make a Difference? *The Clearing House*, 85 179-185

Vandecandelaere, M; Vansteelandt, S; De Fraine, B & Van Damme, J (2016) The effects of early grade retention: Effect modification by prior achievement and age. *Journal of School Psychology* 54 77-93

Walliman, N (2006) *Social Research Methods*. SAGE Publications

Wellington, J (2015) *Educational Research: contemporary issues and practical approaches* 2nd Ed Bloomsbury

Willis, J.W. (2007). *Foundations of Qualitative Research: interpretive and critical approaches*. Sage Publications Inc

White Paper on Integrated National Disability Strategy (Department of Education 1997b)

Wright, R.J (2009) *Methods for Improving Test Scores: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Kappa Delta P Record 45 117-121

Wu, W., West, S.G. & Hughes, J.N. (2010). Effect of Grade Retention in First Grade on Psychosocial Outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 102(1)135-152

Yin, R.K (2014) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 5th Ed. SAGE Publications Inc

Yoshino, A., (2012). The Relationship Between Self-Concept and Achievement in TIMSS 2007: a comparison between American and Japanese students. *International Review of Education*, 58(2), 199-219

## **ADDENDA**

29 June 2018

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Permission to do research at [REDACTED]

I Mrs [REDACTED], principal at [REDACTED], hereby consent to Miss [REDACTED] doing research for her masters study at the school. I will also grant her access to the 2017 Promotion schedules that she has requested to use to identify the learners she will work with.

She has also requested the use of a lockable cupboard to store her data during the duration of her fieldwork. She will be given access to a lockable cupboard in the office that she can keep her data in during her fieldwork.

I am available on [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] for further information.

Principal's signature

School stamp

### Observation guide

Preferred spot to sit in during class

Interactions with classmates

Interactions with teachers

Participation in class

Activities partaking in during break

Activities in community partaking in

Behaviour around persons of authority

Expressing of view and emotions amongst peers and adult



**Interview guide project:** The Journey to identity development for underachieving learners

**Venue:**

**Interviewer:** [REDACTED]

**Interviewee:**

**Description of study:** This study seeks to understand and explain the journey to identity development for learners who experience challenges at school and are thus underachieving. We will discuss identity; goals and goalsetting and community involvement.

## **IDENTITY**

How would you describe yourself to me?

What are your special skills and talents?

What hobbies do you enjoy?

How would you describe your experience in school?

How has school affected the way you see yourself and your capabilities?

Why has this been that way for you?

What would the title of a story about your life be?

Why did you choose that title?

### **GOALS AND GOALSETTING**

What are your hopes and dreams for the future?

What are your biggest successes so far?

What are your biggest failures so far?

How does your performance at school affect your freedom to set goals for your life?

If you were not to complete grade 12, how would that affect your life?

### **COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

What are the challenges that you see in your community?

What do you think needs to be done for your community to overcome these challenges?

How would you work to get your community to overcome these challenges?

Who do you think would expect you to assist in getting the community to a better place?

Why would that person expect that of you?

Why do you think nobody would expect that of you?

## **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

### **LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT ON THE JOURNEY TO IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

**Dear Parent**

Your son/daughter is requested to participate in a research study conducted by [REDACTED] [REDACTED] (MEd Psychology student) and supervised by [REDACTED] [REDACTED], from the Educational Psychology department at Stellenbosch University. This is in compliance with the requirements for the Masters Educational Psychology degree and results from the research will be used in the thesis. Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because his/her experiences throughout their schooling years will be of assistance to the investigator in understanding the lived experiences of learners who experience difficulties in school.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The study seeks to understand and describe the experiences of identity development amongst high school learners who are underachieving and have either been progressed to the next grade or retained in the current grade. This is to gain a deeper understanding of whether their academic difficulties affect their identity and whether the experiences attribute to their future goals and plans.

### **PROCEDURES**

If your child volunteers to participate in this study, he/she will be asked to do the following things:

#### **1. Interview**

Your child and I will sit alone and talk about their experiences of school and their community. He/She will tell me their story. I will ask a few questions to guide the conversation and for clarity only. We will also talk about his/her goals and how he/she arrived at setting the goals they have for their future.

#### **2. Drawing activity**

In this part of the research I will ask him/her to draw a picture for me of an important event in your community that they attended. Then I will ask him/her to draw me a picture of an

event he/she predicts will take place in 10 years' time which will be just as important as the one in the first picture. We will then talk about these pictures.

### 3. Observation

I will spend time in your son/daughter's classroom to observe their interactions with classmates, teachers, activities in class etc. I will also observe your son/daughter outside of the classroom environment during break.

The Investigator will spend approximately an hour 30mins doing the interview and drawing activity with your son/daughter. He/She will not be distracted during school time. Sessions will be held after school. Interviews will take place at the school. Your son/daughter will be assigned a day and time during which he/she will meet the investigator.

### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

This study will need your child to think very deeply about him/herself and to talk about something that is possibly a challenge to him/her. It will require him/her to speak of him/herself truthfully, which may differ from the personality he/she may portray to family and friends. If he/she has not acknowledged some of the things we will talk about, emotional challenges may arise. If he/she feels uncomfortable and wants to talk to a counsellor he/she may contact [REDACTED] on [REDACTED]. There will be no costs incurred for the consultation.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Your son or daughter will receive an opportunity to talk openly about their experiences in an environment that is unconditionally accepting of them and their experiences.

The research generated will give society a better understanding of the emotions and thoughts in an individual who is progressed or retained. This will help provide assistance in the following year that is targeted not only to their academic needs but also to their emotional needs.

### **PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

No money shall be paid to your son/daughter for participating.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you or your child will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of the researcher accessing the promotion schedule herself at the school opposed to requesting teaching staff to identify learners themselves. In this schedule will be recorded the number of years your child has been in the phase they are in which will help the researcher to identify who has been retained. The schedule will also indicate if the learner has been progressed to the next grade or not. This will mean the researcher communicates with the principal regarding information on the research and not the staff. All research related documents and recordings of the interviews shall be kept in a safety box which will remain in the locked boot of the researcher's vehicle whilst she's still doing field research. These will then be transferred to a locked cupboard in her home for the duration of the data collection period.

The researcher's supervisor shall have access to the information upon request should there be need pertaining to reporting on the data in the thesis.

The participants have right to review/edit the recordings up until a month after their interview was recorded. The investigator and supervisor will have access to the audio recordings and shall be erased after a period of 5 years of the researcher submitting her final draft of the thesis.

The results of the study will be used for the investigator's thesis. They will also be used to develop intervention strategies to assist learners to form positive identities despite having academic challenges.

## **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

## **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:

██████████ (Investigator): ██████████

██████████ (Supervisor): ██████████

\_\_\_\_\_ is available to provide counselling if needed. She has agreed to provide these services free of charge. She is available on \_\_\_\_\_ when needed.

## **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, \_\_\_\_\_ at the Division for Research Development.

## **SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE**

The information above was described to me by.....in IsiZulu and I am in command of this language. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily that my son/daughter participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

**SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to \_\_\_\_\_.  
He/she was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation  
was conducted in IsiZulu and no translator was used.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

# ASSENT FORM



**TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT: LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE  
ROLE OF ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT ON THE JOURNEY TO  
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

**RESEARCHERS NAME(S):** [REDACTED]

**ADDRESS:** Department of Educational Psychology

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

**CONTACT NUMBER:** [REDACTED]

## **What is RESEARCH?**

Research is something we do find new knowledge about the way things (and people) work. We use research projects or studies to help us find out more about children and teenagers and the things that affect their lives, their schools, their families and their health. We do this to try and make the world a better place!

## **What is this research project all about?**

I would like to find out from learners like yourself how school has influenced their experiences of forming an identity and their involvement in the communities they live in.

## **Why have I been invited to take part in this research project?**

The researcher has an interest in learning about the lived experiences of people. She is currently interested in learning more about the experience of school, identity and community involvement of teenagers like you. Your experiences in school make your story one she is interested in hearing about in terms of how you have experienced life thus far.

### **Who is doing the research?**

My name is [REDACTED], you can call me [REDACTED], and I am a master's student at Stellenbosch University. As part of my studies I am expected to write a thesis that gives information on a topic that has not been researched yet. This study is going to help me compile that thesis.

### **What will happen to me in this study?**

#### **1. Interview**

You and I will sit alone and talk about your experiences of school and your community. I will ask you a few questions to guide the conversation and also to make sure I have understood what you say the way you mean it. We will also talk about your goals and how you have come to set those goals for yourself.

#### **2. Drawing activity**

In this part I will ask you to draw a picture for me of an important event that took place in your community that you attended. I will also ask you to draw a picture of an event that you predict will happen in 10 years from now in your community that will be just as important as the one in the first drawing

#### **3. Observation**

I will be joining some of your lessons and will also be outside during break time with the rest of the school. During these times, I will do observations of how you interact with classmates, teachers, other figures of authority, other learners in the school. I will also take note of activities you partake in during these times. Information I have gathered during these observations will be discussed with you before anything is added into the data analysis

### **Can anything bad happen to me?**

This study will ask you to talk about something that could be very sensitive to you depending on how your experiences have been up until now. It will need you to talk truthfully about the experiences you have in school and their impact on you, which may be different to how you talk about them when you're with your friends. In that case it may bring feelings of sadness.

### **Can anything good happen to me?**

This study will give you an opportunity to talk openly about your experiences at school and how they influence your life.

**Will anyone know I am in the study?**

Nobody will know that you participated in this study, your name will not be mentioned in the thesis and only the investigator ( ) and her supervisor will have access to the interview audio's and the pictures you will draw.

**Who can I talk to about the study?**

(Investigator):

(Supervisor):

(Psychologist):

What if I do not want to do this?

You have the right to refuse to take part in the study even if your parents have agreed that you take part. You are also allowed to pull out of the study at any time. You will be in trouble for doing so.

Do you understand this research study and are you willing to take part in it?

YES                      NO

Has the researcher answered all your questions?

YES                      NO

Do you understand that you can STOP being in the study at any time?

YES                      NO

---

Signature of Child

---

Date

Interviewer	We are now going to talk about your dreams for the future. What future goals do you have?
Interviewee	I would like to finish matric and go study medicine so I can build my family a home. I also want to help my community.
Interviewer	If you look back on your life thus far, what would you say is/was an achievement?
Interviewee	(Silence) Something I did?
Interviewer	Yes
Interviewee	(Silence) (Clicks tongue) (Silence) Nothing
Interviewer	Ok. What would you say was a failure for you?
Interviewee	At times, I leave home during the day and come back late at night. My family would be very worried because I do not tell them where I am going.
Interviewer	How do your experiences at school influence your confidence in reaching your goals?
Interviewee	(Silence) I could say my dreams and my performance at school are at opposite ends My marks are getting worse and I do not understand why.

### Transcription and Coding Drawing Activity

Interviewer	Thank you [REDACTED] Can we discuss the second drawing, what event is taking place in the second drawing?
Interviewee	(Silence) This is umemulo ( a right of passage ceremony for girls). It's for me. My parents decided that I had deserve it.
Interviewer	How do parents decide that their daughter deserves umemulo or not?
Interviewee	It depends on how you have carried yourself, respected yourself and brought dignity to your family name. So not all females get the ceremony.
Interviewer	Have your parents done this ceremony for you?
Interviewee	No they haven't.
Interviewer	Why not?
Interviewee	It's expensive as they would have to buy a cow for it. They do not have money for it now.

### Transcription and Coding- Observation

- Sits at the back of the classroom
- Adopts socially accepted behaviors for girls i.e do not look adults in the eyes, speaking softly
- Shows respect to teachers
- Obeys instruction
- Hardly disciplined
- Shy when expressing own ideas
- Does not participate lot during lessons
- Works during class
- Similar values as peers
- Limits interactions to few classmates and spends break with the same classmates
- Willing to share stationery with classmates
- Usually asks teacher to repeat instructions as she has struggled to understand
- Struggles to express herself even during practical lessons. Uncertainty about what to do and allows other group members to decide for the group
- Keeps feelings to herself regarding group members' ideas

Key:

Purple: Identity

Green: Community

Blue: School

Red: Career

Yellow: Family